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THE WEDNESDAY WIFE

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THE WEDNESDAY WIFE

BY
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CHAPTER I

THREE DOVES IN A COTE

It was evening in the harem of Attar abu Hamed al Hassen.

The master gazed across at Aletra, and, though she looked not—nor even glanced through the veil of her long black lashes—she knew—and he knew that she knew—he was looking.

Attar and his three wives—Jeppa and Zulaykha and Aletra—were sitting about on cushions on the floor of the harem. Jeppa, his Monday wife, sat nearest him, it being the eve of Monday, from which time the day is reckoned in the East. Zulaykha, his Tuesday wife, sat next to her; and Aletra, his Wednesday wife, farthest away.

Attar, contrary to the Occidental conception of a Mohammedan, was large and blond, almost herculean in build, and wore a great curling beard. His mother had been a gift to his father from one of the half-Turkish, half-Russian tribes of the border, with perhaps more Russian than Turkish blood in her veins, and the old Mohammedan had loved her well.

Besides being cast in a noble mold, his eyes held in

their depths the calm power, the fearless gentleness of a great nature. Not only was he good to look upon, but he was a good man, and deplored the truant habit of his eyes to wander past Jeppa and Zulaykha and rest with delight upon Aletra.

For, according to his faith, it was his duty not only to devote himself to Jeppa on Monday, but to hold her—and her only—in his thoughts on that day. Tuesday was Zulaykha's and Wednesday—ah, Wednesday was Aletra's!

At other times Attar had contented himself with counting the days and the hours till Wednesday should come again, but to-night it was different; he knew that the hours would be lost in the days, the days in the weeks, and the weeks in the months before another Wednesday would find the young Aletra in his arms again. For on the morrow he would begin his journey to the far-distant Occident, taking with him much precious merchandise, and it would be a year—perhaps two—before he would sit in the harem again.

"When I am away," said the master, breaking the silence, "ever I think of ye as three turtle-doves, dwelling in love and sweetness together, ministering unto one another in all kindness. How desolate and dreary must be the one wife of the uncivilized man of the West!"

"And the care of the harem when there are no slaves?" added Jeppa.

"She destroyeth her beauty to accomplish much labor, and at the same time bear children for her husband," he rejoined.

"It should be a life of bondage," said Jeppa, shaking her head.

"But when there are many slaves," spoke Zulaykha, "it is, perchance, not so hard."

Aletra said nothing; her eyes were fixed upon invisible distance as if she were listening intently. There were voices—faint, then coming nearer—men's voices singing in the night. The words they sang were old when the sires of their grandsires sang them in the narrow streets hundreds of years before, or in the light of the caravan fires when crossing the desert.

The voices came nearer, great voices that seemed to answer the silent call of Sahara. At the end of the chanted words was ever a low, echoing urge as of souls grown impatient:

"O tentsman, haste and strike the tents, I pray;
The day grows late.
The caravan's already under way;
They will not wait.
The drummer sounds already the first drum;
The mule-bells call;
Their leads the drivers on the camels lay.
Mate calls to mate.
The evening-prayer is near, and lo! to-night
The sky is clear;
The risen moon looks on the sun's last ray.
Beyond the gate——"

The singers passed, and their voices grew faint beyond the mosque; still none spoke.

"Have we not heard these words since we were children?" thought Attar. "Why strike they us into silence this night? Is it Kismet?"

The caravan call had unsealed the lips of the night. Very close, a shrill, boyish voice sang of the love of Yoseph and Zulaykha; but, breaking in upon it, as if brushing aside so frail and pure a thing as the childish

note, rising threadlike in the outer darkness, came the sound of deeper voices from the inexhaustible wells of human knowledge and desire—mighty voices pulsing softly, singing the tender, deathless love-songs of the East.

Again after each strain there was a low murmur, in which pathos and passion were so blended that they seemed an ecstasy of sorrow. As they came nearer the words were plain. Aletra listened as if she drank in their essence:

"Fair love, my heart I give to thee—
Good night! I go.
Nay, thy sweet form I will not fear—
Good night! I go.
Should I behold thee ne'er again
'Tis right, 'tis right.
I clasp this hour of parting tight—
Good night! I go.
With raven tress and visage clear,
Enchantress dear,
Hast made my daylight dark and drear:
Good night! I go.
O light of faith, thy face thy hair
Like doubt's despair!
Both this and that yield torment rare—
Good night! I go."

The spirit of the night pulsed and throbbed with the unsipped cup of life still in its grasp. The hours were young and the veil of love had not yet been lifted, nor the first kiss yet fallen upon her eyelids; but Hope, Expectation, was in every breath. When, suddenly, as if Allah had touched a great, vibrating chord in the universe, the call of the muezzin sounded from hundreds of minarets, and like so many souls answering,

"Here am I," to the voice of the eternal, countless voices murmured the nightfall prayer of 'Ashr:

"Allah hu Ak Bar! Allah hu Ak Bar!"

From the housetops, streets, harems, bazaars—from the throats of Imaums and Marabouts, from men good and bad—came the same prayer:

"Allah hu Ak Bar! Allah hu Ak Bar!" And in it was the spirit of intense spiritual love.

All other sounds had ceased save this strange, half-heard harmony that meant love and God.

It was as if in some far place of the frozen North love and worship had parted, and kept traveling around the opposite ends of the earth till they met at last in the land of the cassia and lotus, and mingled as mingle the sands of the desert till one is like unto the other. For nowhere else on earth is love so human, and nowhere else is worship so divine.

The prayer had broken the spirit of silence, and when it was over Attar exclaimed:

"By the beard of the prophet! I had forgotten to tell thee the latest gossip." Here he paused. "Another of the Sultan's wives hath escaped!"

"What sayest thou?"

"Another?"

"How passed she the gates?"

"Tell us! Tell us!" came the quick questions.

"Ah!"—with a deprecating lift of the hands, suggesting the fatalism of the Orient—"how may one know these things? She may have looked through the gates and seen the wives of humbler men, like me, taking their steps unwatched to the bazaars, walking in the yellow sunshine; and when the eunuch dozed or, perchance, counted his gold, she was tempted and passed

out to shame and wandering and danger. Or," he continued, smiling, "or she may have been neglected. The Sultan hath many wives. Who knoweth why a woman is content or not content?"

"And it could be that she was not neglected," drawled Zulaykha sweetly. "That could be the trouble. I would not be in the seraglio for all the sweets and soft rugs and tinkling music and silent-footed slaves. The Sultan is too——"

"Stop!" said Attar with quiet, authoritative rebuke. "He is the Sultan. Forget not that."

Zulaykha grew suddenly sober under the rebuke, the more because it came so seldom. Seeing this, Attar added in half banter to soothe her feelings:

"If thou shouldst bear a girl child, and in time the Sultan should ask her of me, thou wouldst plume thyself with pride and give her with thy blessing."

Zulaykha cast him a grateful look, and answered archly:

"If her eyes should be as clear and her hair as gold as thine, O master, she would be good even for the Sultan!"

"Did I not tell thee?" laughed Attar roundly. He held Jeppa's hand between his own, but he looked over her head at Aletra.

"If thou art prospered of Allah on thy journey, wilt thou bring with thee any other wife?" asked Jeppa placidly.

"Ah!"—again lifting his hands, palms outward—"how may I know if Allah wills or not?"

"An thou dost, I pray she may be amiable and not so high-born as to look with scorn upon us," she said gently.

"Look with scorn upon thee, my orange blossom!" he laughed in derision, laying his arms about her shoulders. "In no man's harem beams so much noble loveliness as in mine."

He drew Jeppa's head to his shoulder, but for an instant his eyes sought Aletra's downcast face.

"Such words are honey and delight to the hearts of the harem," answered Jeppa. "We are like sisters, only closer; for the morrow cannot see us scattered as the petals of a flower, one to a near harem, and one to a far."

"I am young yet—not thirty-five," answered Attar. "My father hath had but three wives at my age; and when he died he had five. And as thou knowest, he had sixty years; so I have no need of haste."

"But thou wilt have more wives than thy father in the fullness of time, that thy place in paradise may do thy father honor when Allah calleth thee," said Jeppa proudly; and then in a lower tone, as if breathing a thought, she continued: "I pray we may dwell in sweetness and industry to thy advantage, and that our children may smile in contentment together."

With this she stretched her hand toward Zulaykha, who, being at the gateway of motherhood, answered with a strange smile—the mystery of which haunts a woman's eyes when she is in league with the Infinite and a soul has been called from the vasts.

Zulaykha was part Egyptian, with eyes that seemed to turn inward on some great, satisfying dream, except when they rested upon Aletra; then a veil seemed to fall between them and her visions of joy. She was now the tender charge of Jeppa and Aletra as well.

"Where thou art will always be peace, O Jeppa," answered Attar honestly.

"Thou speakest beautiful words; but how could there be aught but peace with such sweetness as the two companions thou hast given me?" she returned modestly.

Attar bowed his head in assent, and again his truant eyes rested upon the curve of Aletra's neck from ear to shoulder. Jeppa may or may not have noticed it, but in accordance with a magnanimity that the first wives of Oriental harems early school themselves to acquire, she said:

"An thou hast seven wives, one for each day of the week, not one will have so sweet a voice or such dancing grace as Aletra." And then, wishing to please him on this his last night at home, she added: "Bid her sing to thee before thou goest."

Attar hesitated. It was like praying not to be scorched and then walking into the flames; but, that he hesitated was sufficient.

"Dost thou, O gentlest of women, bid her sing?" he queried of Jeppa.

"Aye, that with the morning thou mayst carry beautiful thoughts away with thee."

Aletra's face was a pale mask, neither demure nor anxious, till Attar spoke; then the surge of life showed delicately pink to her dark brows.

"Aletra——" He paused for the pure delight of uttering her name. "Aletra, sing thou of the rose and the nightingale."

From her position beside Zulaykha, where she seemed even smaller than the little Egyptian, Aletra rose. The movement was like the unfolding of a flower—delicately

deliberate, disclosing new beauties in each transition, until she stood erect, a tall, slim, lily of a woman.

Each time she arose thus, it was a fresh surprise to Attar. So finely was she fashioned that she gave a suggestion of delicate fragility associated only with small women.

She paused a moment and, with a supple motion, turned her head and asked:

"Wilt thou that I fetch the lute?"

"Nay," said Attar, his eyes dwelling with pleasure on the poised figure. But he tightened the pressure about Jeppa's waist, for this was not Wednesday.

Aletra stood motionless, but her poise vibrated with life.

Presently she began—almost speaking the first words of a Persian ghazal, with its ever-haunting words, recurring and still recurring in that peculiar rhythm that other nations have so vainly sought to catch. In a far corner of the harem court an amber light cast a faint halo upon the shadows, outlining the swaying figure in its floating raiment, gently undulating like a flower stirred by the breath of spring, and upon the three forms on the rugs.

Aletra's heart was breaking for a look into the eyes of the master; yet not once did she raise her own.

There are two kinds of women—those who look and subjugate the heart of man and those who reign by being looked upon. Aletra was born to be looked upon, and not only was she a lure to the eye, but added to her great beauty was her voice, sweet, pure, palpitating with feminine seductiveness.

Moments followed each other, but the time was golden-winged and bedewed with the honey of delight.

Attar listened to the velvet-soft voice rising and falling, to the tenderness and wooing of the words, to the refusal and surrender of the swaying arms.

In the cadence of her voice he heard only the whisper of her heart to his. The night wind from many rose-gardens seemed to float about her, and their perfume to nestle in her hair.

Not only with her lips did she sing, but her round, slim arms, the constant fluent motion of her shapely hands, her ankles and wrists and mouth and brows, also sang their love-sweet harmony to the man's heart and soul and senses, as his eyes rested upon her. The beauty of the ghazals he only dimly comprehended; but the night and the passion of the night—he understood; and it consumed him.

The gentle odor of the south wind, the incense of sandal and aloe wood, and the spices that perfumed the rugs, the honeyed sweetness of rose-leaves, and—Aletra, like a flower of the night—with all the mysterious grace of alluring, enchanting, forbidden womanhood—burned into his brain, never to be forgotten.

Through different ghazals and old Arabic and Persian verse, she told the story of all loves—the desire, the heart-break, the surrender, the final merging into tragedy or infinite satisfaction—and then she stopped. But the last word blended so gently into the silence as to seem a soothing emanation from the fragrance of the scented African night.

"It is beautiful," sighed Jeppa. Zulaykha appeared to doze lightly; for what is the song of the love-bird to the dream of the first nestling? Attar said nothing, and Aletra turned toward the casement in the wall.

"Behold!" she cried, and pointed with arms out-

stretched and head turned, "Behold the moon shineth upon the mosque! Wake thou, Zulaykha, and make a wish. It will touch the minaret before thou canst reach the casement."

"Thou, O Aletra, canst make thy wish for my safe return while I wander in strange lands," said Attar softly.

Her voice trembled as she answered:

"At every call of the muezzin."

Her eyes were not raised toward the mosque; for the space of a moment they sought the master's face. Neither looked he upon the mosque. Aletra held his gaze.

Zulaykha, who had but seemed to doze, saw the look, and in that moment all the soft docile charm of her olive face vanished, and a dark tenseness seemed to clothe her. None saw the look. It passed swiftly as the shadow of a bird upon the wing—and when Jeppa spoke to her she answered in all sweetness.

Then, with the arrogance of one who expects to give a son to the master, she besought fate for the safe birth of a man-child with fair hair and sturdy limbs. Aletra had no child or the prospect of such a blessing, and Zulaykha besought Allah with wild fierceness that he never permit her to bear a *child* for the master, only girls. For in Islam, a child means a boy.

The heavy flowers of the Bougainvillea that covered the white wall around the harem court looked black in the shadows, and the leaves of the date-palms seemed like etchings of ink upon a lambent field—like fingers of fate stretched toward the silver mystery of the night. Above the high wall, the mosque rose darkly in the distance. But even as they looked, it turned to

shimmering silver—as if a veil, thin as air, light as star-dust, had been silently spread, luminous, gleaming, on the dew-wet places till it glistened, sparkled, scintillated, on the tiled sides of the minaret. The moon had risen over Tunis.

Attar sighed deeply.

"The night groweth old, my children," he said, turning to Jeppa. "I had not thought it so late," he continued in apology to her.

"We can sleep when thou art gone," she answered.

Reluctantly he closed the casement where Aletra stood, still looking, still wishing—what?

"Good night, O Zulaykha," said Jeppa, admonishingly. "Keep the mists from coming in thy casement. And thou, Aletra," turning with a tenderer warmth toward the other, "remember thou art not really a nightingale, nor yet a rose. Seek thy bed—thou needest rest."

She spoke as a mother might.

"Sweet one, let me tarry still a moment, for the moon yet lies upon the mosque," answered Aletra, who had opened the casement a little way to look again upon the night.

"Stay, then, but not overlong. See, Zulaykha hath gone, and the master will hold me accountable for his nightingale."

"I will stay but a short moment," said the girl.

"Good night, O Aletra," said Attar as he led Jeppa to her part of the harem. A moment more and she had passed within the room, but he paused in the doorway, for Aletra had not answered. Very softly, as if Allah or his listening soul might hear, he whispered with infinite tenderness:

"Aletra!"

He held out his arms as he spoke. She heard, but did not see. He waited for her to turn, but she did not. She was at war with Allah and his law; she dared not look. Then she said:

"Good night, my master." It was almost a sob.

Attar took a step forward. His face was pale, his eyes tragic with the weight of the law of Allah.

Aletra did not turn, but buried her face in her arms. He took another step toward her, then paused. Jeppa was moving about in the room—but he did not go in. He stood irresolute—torn between the primal instinct for the *one woman* and an inherited tradition—in an agony of indecision. He took another step forward—wavered, then quickly turning, passed within to Jeppa and closed the olive-wood door.

CHAPTER II

"WEAK FOR LOVE OF THEE"

LONG before the breaking of dawn the household of Attar abu Hamed al Hassen was astir, for with the muezzin's call to sunrise prayer the master would begin his journey to the far distant Occident. Even in the harem the children were awakened after the first sleepy crowing of the cocks.

There was Hamed, first and most important of all, the eldest son, by Jeppa. He was now fourteen, and many had been the talks of getting him a wife. Such girl-children of ten or twelve as were taken to the baths commanded Jeppa's closest attention.

For the young men of the Orient are indebted to their mothers for their first wives. Education and accomplishments enter into the consideration, but birth, beauty, health, and the ability to embroider are essentials. Yet no girl had commended herself sufficiently in Jeppa's eyes to be worthy of her beautiful boy.

Then there was Selim, a nephew, a lad of seventeen, who was to follow Attar in half a year with merchandise that the camels would bring from across the desert. He was tall, but slim and pale. He had lately broken his leg and still walked with supports.

There were also two other children, girls, who were in the harem with the women. One of them belonged

to Jeppa—Zema, who was eight years old. The other, Zittarra, was the child of a kinsman who had perished in the desert ten years before.

Zittarra could embroider more beautifully than any other girl of her age. Already there had been two askings for her in marriage. Though she was not quite thirteen, she was finely developed and of modest mien, and her beauty occasioned much admiration in the baths. These all shared Attar's fatherly attention.

Again and again he folded each child in his arms with great affection, and many were the admonishing, tender or encouraging words he gave them on this, his last morning at home.

Of the women Zulaykha was the chief recipient of his attentions—she being so near to becoming a mother.

Many times had the master and Zulaykha discussed the naming of the babe that would come in his absence. But it was only on this morning that they decided that, if it were a boy, it should be called Jafiz, and if a girl, Shireen.

"Jeppa," said Attar, when he had soothed Zulaykha, "thou wilt buy what silks and canvas thou shalt need at Verna's Bazaar, and teach Zema her lute, and have good care that Hamed take not the fever——"

Here he was interrupted by little Zema's kisses as she clung to him, begging:

"Bring to me a golden mendeel with jewels when thou returnest."

"Yea! That will I," he answered.

"Forget not my horse," cried Hamed through the casement, "and a sword, O my father!"

"Is that all thou cravest?" asked Attar.

"Yea, I would rather have them than a wife—I like not girls."

"Thou art wise, my son. It troubleth the heart to get them, and it breaketh the heart to leave them."

With this he embraced Zulaykha—his Tuesday wife—and tried to dry her tears with his kerchief. The children cried and clung about their father with the tenacity of imperious youth.

Jeppa was pale, but soothed little Zema with loving words and promises. She possessed the grace of extreme womanliness, impossible for manhood to ignore. Feeling this, Attar reached over Zulaykha's head and, laying his hand lightly on her shoulders, said:

"May Allah guide and keep thee, O Jeppa—thee and thy children. Thou art in truth my good wife, and I will love thee well."

Jeppa raised her eyes. In them lay the world-old look of womanhood—inscrutable, mysterious, disconcerting.

"I will treasure thy words," she answered with lowered eyes—that gave him the sense of having seen into a strange country, and then suddenly having had it closed from his view. Zulaykha's weeping became hysterical as the time of parting grew near—visions of disaster tormented her.

"We shall never see thee again! My boy will never hear thee calling Allah's blessings upon his head!" she moaned.

"Peace, Zulaykha! Art thou not of the faithful? Canst thou not trust the might of Allah's hand to bear me back again?"

"Yea, O master; I will try. But if the water or the

ravening world of which thou hast told us should consume thee, or I should go while giving life to thy child, make thou a tryst with me, I pray, in paradise, that I may be again with thee and hear thy voice!" she said brokenly.

"It shall be as thou sayest, Zulaykha. If aught befall me, I shall call thee, too, to paradise. Now, dry thine eyes and cheer thy heart—for naught is there in the great world to fear, and always at the hour of prayer, though I hear not the muezzin's call, my heart will turn to Allah. Fear not, and let thy parting courage give me peace to carry on my journey."

As he spoke he soothed the weeping woman with tender looks and soft caresses. But even as the words fell from his lips he wondered that Aletra came not before him.

At first he was not sorry to have it so, for Jeppa perhaps had seen enough to wound her gentle heart the night before—and he was trying to live a blameless life before Allah. But when Aletra did not come, and it neared the time of his departure, he grew anxious.

"She, too, hath had her struggle through the long white hours of the night, even as I; she, too, hath conquered, even as I," he thought. But he listened for her footsteps and grew restless.

When at last there remeained but half an hour he asked Jeppa:

"Where is Aletra? She waketh late on such a day."

And Jeppa answered:

"Blame her not, O master—she loveth thee well, as thou knowest, and hath gone to the bazaar, that she may get thee a parting gift to take away with thee."

Even while Jeppa was speaking a wave of great happiness rushed over him, and his voice was as soft as the wind in spring-time when he objected:

"But the distance is great. She may not return in time!"

Then Jeppa veiled her eyes and answered low so that Zulaykha might not hear:

"Her way is past the road to the harbor where thy ship lieth. If she come not here in time thou wilt meet her on the way."

Then, though she saw it not, his eyes beamed upon her with such gratitude that almost it had seemed love, but it was not. For though he thought his heart was full and overflowing he had not yet known love.

The precious moments passed. They could not fly too swiftly—for to part with Aletra with no other eye to see was something he had not dared to pray for.

Zulaykha still moaned her omens of disaster, but she had grown less vehement, and there was resignation in her cry: *"Salaam Alek!"* The children echoed Zulaykha's lamentations. Jeppa alone stood calm, reassuring, comforting.

"It is time that thou didst go," she said at last. "I will do what is in the path before me. Comfort thou thine heart that all will be well in thy harem, and have no evil forebodings about thy journey. Allah will keep thee safe."

Almost reverently Attar put his hand upon her head without speech, for his heart was full. Then, turning, he again embraced each of the children and repeated the *bismillah,* without which no Moslem begins a journey; then turned and almost fled out of the harem, out of the courtyard, into the street, into the gray dawn, where Aletra waited.

But when the gate of the harem had closed upon him Zulaykha rose and her face grew dark.

"Aletra?" she questioned. "What didst thou murmur to the master concerning Aletra? And where hideth she that she may steal the master's love?"

"Peace, Zulaykha," said Jeppa softly.

"Peace sayest thou? Peace bideth not in a house where one craveth all."

Jeppa made no answer; the Egyptian crouched again upon the rugs in sullen anger.

Attar had gone some distance when he passed an ancient temple. Stopping to look about him he felt a touch—light as the dropping of a leaf—upon his arm. Impatient of the delay he questioned:

"Who art thou? And what wilt thou? I am in haste to go to meet my ship."

"O master!" came a voice from the folds of the veil.

"Aletra! Thou!" he said softly; and drew her into the shadow of the wall. With impatient fingers he lifted her veil and looked into her eyes.

"O master, master!" she sobbed, and her soul was on her lips. "I cannot let thee go."

"Nay, thou shouldst be brave like unto Jeppa," he chided fondly.

"Ah, Jeppa hath her children that are of thee, and Zulaykha her hope, and the children have their dreams —but I have only thee."

In the hidden recess of the ruins where they stood she dropped the dark *haik* from her shoulders and threw her arms before her face.

"Nay, but thou knowest that it is meet that I go, my Flower of Paradise. It is the will of Allah," he remonstrated soothingly.

"I cannot let thee go," she said again.

He took her slender hands from before her face and placed them about his neck. The contact calmed the white anguish in her face, and as he put his arm about her she trembled. Her body swayed like a reed on his supporting arm, and when his lips touched hers and lingered in their ardor she scarcely breathed in the supremacy of her happiness—the divine sufficiency of love's moment—lest he note the time and release her.

She saw his face bent above her; she felt the strength of his arm, and would have been content to die, for the bliss of eternity was crowded into the flying moments. She lay in his arms almost inert, yielding, half aswoon.

He bent his head, and his eyes feasted upon the lissom figure in its clinging garments. The grace of the delicate limbs, the absolute abandon, the childish helplessness, the heavenly sweetness of her brows and mouth and closed eyes and curved cheek as she swayed like a flower in his arms delighted him. His gaze consumed her; she felt it through the magic of a sense we comprehend not. A slight tenseness ran through the slim body, and the faintest movement of resistance. But Attar crushed her to him and again sought her lips. The clinging tenderness of his kisses robbed her of all strength, and she surrendered her will, as she had her flowerlike body, to the strength of his caresses.

Then suddenly a great shame fell upon her. With her soft hands she lifted his head, and, looking into the fire of his eyes, whispered despairingly:

"Thou lovest me not."

"I love thee not?"

"Nay—thou lovest me not, O master!"

"And thinkest thou I know not the time is fleeing! Hast thou not made a coward of me? Am I not grown so weak for love of thee that I sail not to-day?"

"Not sail to-day, thou sayest?"

"Nay."

"Thou wilt sail to-day," she answered, and she tried to free herself; but he would not let her go.

He drew her closer, and began in a softer tone:

"My cherry-blossom, my cassiabud, my beautiful hyacinth—thou art sweeter than all the spices in the Sultan's seraglio, O delight of my heart! Last night it seemed as if thou hadst a bird imprisoned in thy throat that could make men forget all—honor, right, Allah himself—and I tried to hold the thought of thee from me as I would one of the great sins, as became the husband of so perfect a wife as Jeppa. For it was Monday, and Monday was hers. But when I slept, when my soul was free, I dreamed of thee—O Aletra, I dreamed of thee!" he repeated softly.

"And I dreamed of thee," she whispered.

"And what was thy dream?"

"I dreamed," she answered—and her eyes looked into the distance, as one who sees into the unseen, and her words came slowly and very low—"I dreamed that I knew thou didst love me; that there was a great throng, greater than a thousand caravans coming in from the desert—all strange.

"I dreamed that I had lost thee, and my search was as for a grain of millet in the sands of the Sahara, or on the shore of the sea; and—and—then I heard thee say: 'Aletra, I love thee well; and time and multitude and distance are as nothing in the hand of love.' And then I felt thy arms about me, even as now."

Again he strained her to him, but she resisted.

"Why dost thou turn from me?" he asked impatiently.

"It is time that thou didst go."

"Nay, for I go not to-day. I wait another ship—another Wednesday," he said softly.

"But thy holdings are in this?"

"They are safe."

"Nay, thou goest now. There still is time."

With this she tried to free herself from the great arms that held her. So they stood, she who had flown to him trying to release herself. At last he let his arms fall from her and stood back.

"It is thou who lovest me not," he said reproachfully.

Then Aletra lifted her eyes. There was in them that which he never had seen before. So the houris of paradise must look, he thought, when they proffer the essence of love that has passed through its last distillation and has been purified of Allah. So frail, so heaven-born sweet, she looked, that he dared not touch her.

He had told her that she did not love him; and for answer, she had lifted a corner of the curtain of paradise, and shown him her soul, stainless in its purity, perfect in its love. As he looked, the burning, eager splendor of his eyes changed, and a new light shone from them; and his countenance was transformed.

So love quickened and was born in his consciousness. And though they touched each other not so much as by the tips of their fingers, they were nearer than the rapturous ardor of clinging lips had ever brought them.

"Now, O My Heart, shalt thou go," she whispered.

"Yea, but I go not alone. Thy love goeth with me."

"And I stay not alone, for thy love bideth beside me," she answered.

The newly risen sun touched the dome of the distant mosque as with a thousand golden spears; and the

muezzin's call floated to them on the breath of the morning wind; but when it had ceased Aletra cried:

"Haste, haste! Thy ship, thy ship!" and she pointed toward the harbor. But Attar, still dazed with the new mystery of womanhood, said:

"I go. But how canst thou send me now, when thou hast cried within the hour: 'O master, I cannot let thee go'?"

And she made answer with feigned lightness to hide the tears that were so near:

"Knowest thou not that it is harder for a woman to part from the man she loveth, if he would go, than if he would tarry?"

With this she gathered her veil that she had cast aside, and made it fast with trembling fingers.

"Thou hast not the space of a moment to lose," she counseled. "Go thou, and Allah and my love go with thee."

Then, seeing that he would tarry, she gathered her *habrah* about her and fled.

Attar called to her and started to follow, but she heeded him not as she sped swiftly on between the crumbled walls of the temple. Seeing that she would not obey he paused, and looking up beheld her on a part of the ruin just above him.

"O master, master," she said slowly. "An thou knowest love, which in truth is the essence of wisdom, hasten thou with all speed to thy ship."

Then, as Attar looked for a foothold to reach her, she turned and once more vanished between the broken columns. When her face no longer tempted him he thought of her words:

"An thou knowest love, which in truth is the essence of wisdom, hasten thou with all speed to thy ship."

And, sighing, he took his way toward the road to the harbor.

Attar Al Hassen had scant time to reach the waterside and embark.

As the ship swung into the golden path of the newly risen sun he strained his eyes for a sight of the fleeing black figure of Aletra. Back and forth his gaze roamed from the ruins to different openings or gates in the walls of the fast receding city, but he could catch no glimpse of her.

Then suddenly he saw her. She had not left the ruins, but had wound her way between the fallen walls and pillars, each higher than the other, till at last she stood clear against the sky, upon the furthermost projection looking toward the sea. The sun was full upon her.

As he looked, she unwound her veil and let it float like a misty cloud of incense as if it would remind him of its lingering perfume of lotus and amber, which still clung to his garments.

"Aletra!" he said softly; "Aletra!"

As if she had heard, the tiny glint of white shone for the time of a breath against the gray veil. Then, as a silver cloud obscured the intense brightness of the sun, she disappeared like a vapor, leaving no trace, and he saw her no longer.

CHAPTER III

WORD FROM THE MASTER—AND A DREAD

It was August in the harem court of Attar abu Hamed al Hassen. Two months had passed since the master had journeyed to the far Occident with rugs and silks and precious carvings. His three wives now sat upon the rugs, much as they had sat the evening before his departure—Jeppa next to the main opening, embroidering, as also was Aletra.

The mid-summer heat drew the perfume from the very heart of the roses, even as their stems grew weak and let the burden of blossoms droop their heads like tired maidens at noontime.

The heavy flowers of the Bougainvillea, warmly purple, showed upon the white wall of the court beyond. A small lemon tree cast a light shade upon the ground. Zulaykha held her babe up for the hundredth time to trace the lineaments of Attar in its unmolded countenance.

"Hamed hath looked thus when he was a babe," said Jeppa. Zulaykha turned half indignantly, and cast a doubting look upon her.

"Had he so strong and lusty a body, then?"

And Jeppa, looking again upon the infant, answered:

"Nay, he was stricken with a fever that would not

mend. And the master feared that he would not long bless our lives." Then she added softly: "But I knew that he would."

"How didst thou know?" asked Zulaykha, putting her hand to her own child's head lovingly. Then she added in agitation:

"Feel thou his brow, O Jeppa. Doth it not seem hot to thee?"

Jeppa slowly fastened her needle in her work, and felt the infant's head. Then she smiled, and said:

"Nay, Zulaykha, all is well with him; but thou wilt have many frights before he doth see his first year. They are a part of motherhood."

Aletra lifted her head to a rose-jar that stood near an opening in the harem court where they sat.

"They have both given sons to Attar," she thought, "while I am like the roses wilting in the cool kiosks"; and she sighed.

"What lieth so heavy upon thy heart, Aletra?" asked Jeppa. "Is aught amiss with thy altar-cloth?"

"Nay; it groweth under my hands well," she answered.

"But thinkest thou such dogs of Christians will like a mosque broidered upon their altars?" asked Zulaykha, stroking the head of her sleeping child.

For the piece Aletra was working on was to go to an English church.

"I doubt it not," said Aletra. "For hath not the master told us of great temples fashioned like the mosques of the Byzantines even in the far New Country where he now journeyeth?"

"It should be a great land," said Jeppa, "taking five days' swift travel to get from one side to the other."

"He saith no word of bringing any other wife from that country. It would cost much; it is so far. I pray he do not. And what sayest thou, Aletra?" smiled Zulaykha. For the coming of a new wife is usually felt the worst by the last one preceding when the number of wives is small, especially if a stranger is selected by the husband.

"I care not," answered Aletra while a smile and rosy blush mounted to her brow at the memory of her parting with Attar.

"So thou sayest now," laughed Zulaykha. "But wait till he entereth with some golden-haired lily of the West, and biddeth thee love her for his sake. Then——"

"Then," quickly interrupted Aletra, "should I love her for his sake. It could not make as much as the weight of a feather difference."

Jeppa always had admired Aletra. But as she looked at her now—calm, beautiful, without fear—she loved her.

Jeppa had been selected for Attar by his mother when she was but ten years old; and the first few months after she was brought to the harem, she was a frightened child. Two years later his mother died; and in soothing the boy-husband's sorrow, she had begun a comprehending, comforting friendship.

This friendship lasted through the years. But love, timid and trembling at the door of her heart, had been frightened away when Zulaykha was given to Attar by a great ameer and was made welcome as a wife. She loved Attar, but the full expression of her affection was only for her children, and of late for Aletra.

"Why carest thou not?" persisted Zulaykha tormentingly.

"For that it maketh no difference," said Aletra sweetly.

"Oh, oh! Art thou then so sure of always being the favorite?" said Zulaykha.

"Peace, peace!" interrupted Jeppa. "When one day of the week is greater than another, then will there be favorites."

"Thou art right, O Jeppa," said Aletra.

Having spoken, she began to fold her work. There was a deft grace about the movement that made it a delight to look upon. As she leaned lightly against the rose-jar, she smiled upon Jeppa; the smile lingered like a clinging caress and its winning sweetness warmed the heart of the older woman.

There was an awkward silence after Jeppa's reproof, which presently was broken by the call to evening prayer, *"Allah hu Ak Bar! Allah hu Ak Bar!"* As the three women prostrated themselves, a spear of sunshine shot through an opening in the walled court and, like a benediction from the skies, touched Aletra's head with its brightness.

The place was silent. No sound of traffic or speech marred the sudden stillness—only the slow sonorous chant of the muezzin: "God is most great! God is most great!"

The slanting sunlight touched the little group with the magic of beauty. A bee drowsed languidly over the roses. The yellow curtains floated softly in the casement openings. The spell of the hour was over all. The chanting continued, *"Allah hu Ak Bar! Allah hu Ak Bar!"* Then it ceased, and a great wave of sound like the surge of the sea, filled the world about.

The moment with Allah in the silence was past. The three women rose, smiled at each other, and Jeppa and Aletra folded their work while Zulaykha still fondled her babe. The day was coming to a close, as many other days had come and gone, without incident —for this is the manner of harem life—when Hamed rushed to his mother, crying:

"A letter! A letter!"

Instantly there was a great stir, and exclamations of impatience came from Zulaykha and Hamed as Jeppa opened the letter and silently scanned the first pages.

"Allah is merciful and compassionate," she said. "All is well. I will read it to ye." And she read:

"Blessing upon thee, O Jeppa:

"Allah be with thee in the brightness of the morning and when the night cometh down in darkness with thee and Zulaykha and Aletra, and all that are in my harem.

"I am alone in a great khan—a hotel, they call it—thinking of my sun and my moon and my stars in the little court garden beyond the waters and the land that stretcheth between.

"What civilization is this, that separateth a man from his wives! But for the laws made by these pigs of Christians, thou and Zulaykha and Aletra would be here with me—and I would be happy. As it is, I turn my face to the East, and wish for mine own—they that Allah, out of his bounty, hath given me.

"I hunger with a great desire for the sound of soft voices and a word in Arabic, and the thirst of my heart will not be slaked. I laugh aloud at the simple thought of these infidels. But yesterday, one hath said to me: 'Dost thou not think it better to have one wife, as is our custom here?'

"And I made answer: 'Nay! Nay! I think it most unseemly.'

"And again I told him: 'It would be the work of three wives to do that which your wife doeth of work in the harem' —home, they call it—'ministering to her children.'

" 'But she would rather die than have me take another wife,

even if I could,' he made answer. And his one wife, who was present—for here, husbands take any man into their harems, and let them speak to their unveiled wives—spoke, saying: 'A woman endureth much for the surety that she only and her children will be cherished by her husband.'

"And I said to her: 'Ah, madam, our women are not like that. They love one another, and are like sisters; and the child of one is the care of all the others. They speak softly, and move like the flowers, and are not jealous.'

"Then I told them of thee, Jeppa, and how lonely thou wouldst be without Zulaykha and Aletra. And I showed them the letter thou hadst sent me telling of Zulaykha's beautiful boy, and how thou didst pray Allah that night of her great suffering. I had to translate it, as she knew only her own tongue.

"But she said thy writing was beautiful, and was amazed that Mohammedan women had any book knowledge. I told her of Aletra's speaking and writing five tongues, and of Zulaykha's beautiful embroideries, and of thine art with the flute. As it was Wednesday, I carried Aletra's kerchief and I showed it her; and she marveled again that I had not my own name on it in place of Aletra's. Her husband has his own initial on his kerchiefs—the pig!

"Ever they marvel that I desire not to live in their country.

"Nay! Nay! My children give me the soft music of the muezzin's call, and the winds murmuring through mimosa trees, the rose-gardens, the shady kiosks, the spices, the rugs, and above all, the women, of the East, with their uncramped bodies and screened faces and soft tongues.

"There are those here, O my Doves, who would come with me if I asked them. The unveiled eyes of many are boldly looking for men. I want none of them—but hunger for a sight of mine own!

"Tell Zulaykha to write everything about her boy. I rejoice that Hamed and Zema heed thy word and learn of thee.

"Tell Aletra not to weaken her eyes working by night on her broidery, as thou sayest she doth. I send her my loving commands to get her rest, and not sit the night out."

Here Jeppa paused in the reading, and looking at Aletra said:

"I told thee I would tell him!"

Then she continued to read minute instructions about the buying of supplies, and other household matters. Then came the prayer, without which the Moslem never closed his letter:

"In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate! May he protect ye from the darkness of the night which falleth like a cloak upon dangers, known and unknown; and from the storm and the lightning that issue therefrom; and preserve thee in sweet peace, till I shall come again. Rest secure, O little household, in the love of thy absent master.

"ATTAR ABU HAMED AL HASSEN."

A sigh of contentment issued in unison from the lips of the three women, followed by a fervent "Great is Allah!"

"He saith naught of bringing my yataghan," said Hamed disappointedly, leaving the harem.

Jeppa still held the letter, rereading certain parts, when she turned the last page and found there an added paragraph.

"More followeth!" she exclaimed in surprise; and she read:

"I have but just met a man and family, fresh from Aca. They tell me the Imaum there, Abdul Baha, hath ever a multitude about him. They say this Imaum is the Blessed Perfection, and many believe he is the Messiah, or the Lord Isa (Jesus) come to life again.

"This man from Aca hath a son and two daughters. They speak Arabic, Persian, Spanish, French, and some English.

"I may have a surprise for ye when I return to the East. I hasten now with this to the ship. Hafiz, the kinsman of Nazar, will bring it to thee, and the time is short.

"Allah be with thee.

"A."

This second reading dampened the sweet sense of

pleasurable security left by the first. Jeppa folded the letter with great care, creasing it again and again, and said nothing. Zulaykha lifted her thick brows and pursed her lips.

"We might well expect it," she said at last. "I felt a whispering of it."

"Expect what?" said Aletra, lifting her head.

"Another wife."

"He saith naught of another wife?"

"Nay. But that is what he meaneth."

"How knowest thou what he meaneth?" returned Aletra. But her face wore the paleness of death, and her eyes held in their depths the inscrutable world-old look of womanhood.

CHAPTER IV

ALETRA'S PRAYER TO THE MOON

It was nearing midnight in the harem of Attar abu Hamed al Hassen. Jeppa heard Aletra leave her bed and make her way softly to the roof. The moon had not yet risen and only the soft starlight marked the shadow-wrapped minarets about the city, the seraglio in the distance and the nearer mosque.

The girl stood with her eyes cast down and her head bent, murmuring:

"O Allah, most Just, most Merciful, protect thou him from the witchery of the strangers—those that look upon him with desire and would tempt him from the true faith."

A thin, gray veil fluttered about her shoulders, and her unbound hair fell about her face in billowy splendor.

Jeppa had followed, not to spy, but to comfort and soothe. Now, being come, she hesitated. Aletra stood motionless looking toward the mosque, as if waiting. Presently long shadows leaped from the walls and they were dark, threadlike, lacy etchings upon the white gravel in the court below.

Then suddenly the bright moonlight fell silveringly upon the shining tiles of the minarets. And as Jeppa watched in the shadow the girl lifted her hands and sank upon her knees.

"Allah, Allah, Allah!" she breathed. "Tell him that Aletra keepeth her tryst with him—that as the moon now shineth upon the mosque so my love falleth upon him. The country is far where he journeyeth, O heart of Allah! But the moon seeketh him out and findeth him, even there. Even so, my heart goeth across the world to him. Tell him this, O soul of Allah, or I perish.

"Forgive thou my transgressions that I call to him across the world—for this being Monday, his heart belongeth to Jeppa—the gentle, the true, the lovely one. Give her the dream of paradise as she resteth in chaste obedience to thy law, and let the perfect ones of paradise kiss her brow; while I—I, in my torment—beseech thee for a sign, a word that the master hath not forgotten me.

"But even, O most just Allah, even if he should tear my heart, keep thou him from the darkness of the night and the darkness of the waters, and preserve him unto paradise."

Then, as if in answer to her cry, the voice of the muezzin floated tenderly on the midnight air. As she prostrated herself, it fell like answering balm on her anguished senses, and a great wave of peace swept over her, even as the dawn creeps over the hushed darkness of the night, revealing the promise of day.

Jeppa had crept closer while the frenzy of the prayer lasted; so that, as they rose when the muezzin's voice had died, the two women faced each other. Jeppa opened her arms, and Aletra, knowing that the other had seen the nakedness of her soul, fell upon her neck and wept.

"My heart, I am wicked. Touch me not, lest thy

purity be defiled," said the girl; the older woman held her the tighter.

"Answer, for thou art the soul of truth," sobbed Aletra. "How didst thou feel when Zulaykha was brought here?"

Jeppa made no answer.

"Speak!"

"It is so long."

"Yea, but the memory of woman is long."

"I was but a child."

"Children are we always; but Allah hath given us to feel."

There was no answer.

"Answer, Jeppa—thou perfect one. How was it with thee when Zulaykha was brought here?"

Still no answer.

"Nay, thou shalt not tell me—for by no word am I answered better than by words."

Then Jeppa lifted her head and said:

"I was as thou art now—and thou wilt be as I am now."

"Never! Though I live an hundred lives."

"The time is not yet fulfilled."

"Nor ever will be."

"I fear nothing from the master's words," the first wife continued, ignoring the vehement denials of the other. "It is but the poison of Zulaykha's tongue that rankleth in thy bosom."

"What other meaning have his words?" asked Aletra.

"They could mean a thousand things—a pilgrimage, a fortune, gifts, honors—anything but a woman."

"Why not a woman?"

"That least of all would he speak of. He is a man. Thou hast yet that to learn. Men prate not, as do women, of that which they know causeth trouble. They act."

"But, my eyes——"

"There is yet another reason."

"What reason?"

"He loveth thee too well."

"Jeppa, I bade him Salaam Alek alone—I robbed Zulaykha of one moment of bliss."

"I know," said Jeppa.

"How didst thou know?" with surprise as she held Jeppa from her and looked questioningly into her eyes.

"I sent him."

"Thou!"

"Yea—I told him thou wouldst meet him on the way; and he hath not been able to conceal his joy—nay, consume me not with thy kisses," she added.

"Thou hast brought the blossom of comfort to my heart. Of a truth, Allah hath given me my word, my sign. Praise be unto him!"

"Even so," said Jeppa.

"Yet am I ungrateful, and wish that I might have first seen the light in the New Country."

"Blaspheme not—lest thou bringest the wrath of Allah upon thy head!"

"Didst thou hear aught? Harken!" Aletra whispered.

"It is but the stirring of Zulaykha's child."

Then, fearing that the mother would rise to comfort her babe, and be wounded to find them in secret speech, they made their way back, past Zulaykha and into their softly curtained rooms, with careful footfalls and a silent embrace at parting.

CHAPTER V

IN THE PASSING SOUL OF SUMMER

THE soul of the summer was passing in the harem of Attar abu Hamed al Hassen. Flowers that had bloomed for months were dying from an overdose of life, like broken beauties that have lived too much. Even the colors of such as still blossomed were faded and faint.

In August there came a strange sickness. Some said the caravans brought it from beyond the desert; others said it was the hand of the Prophet against the unfaithful—and even the faithful who consorted with the infidel Christians. But such poison did it spread upon the air that where one died of the sickness ten were stricken, and almost none rose up to health again.

In September the women stopped visiting in the harems. When October came the baths were deserted. If it became known that one was sick, whether in the most costly seraglio or the poorest hut, the people fled; and so great was the fear of the plague that if any of the household appeared those who saw her cried: "Hence, hence! Why wouldst thou defile us?"—or, in the case of a relative, "Why wouldst thou encompass the destruction of our children?"

When the kinsmen of the stricken besought, "Give us food or we perish," the more compassionate would

leave food at a certain place—but refused coin lest they might become affected.

Often a slight illness was taken for the plague, because such as had it would ever call it by some other name. Everywhere there was hiding and deception. Sometimes even death was concealed—that the members of the family might have one day more to go forth to the bazaars and buy food.

The sickness spread, and nothing was done to prevent it. The government took no steps, or very weak ones, and the merchants feared lest their holdings should be condemned if the truth became known. So there were great numbers of the stricken in hiding. Often children would go to the schools in the mosques fresh from the embrace of plague victims and remain. Again, others were driven away because a brother had perhaps been moaning with the toothache the night before.

In the harem of Attar all was quiet. The women stayed at home for the most part. But in October Hamed fell ill unto death. Jeppa did not summon a physician, but brewed medicine of foreign powders that the master had brought with him from his travels two years before, and which was said to possess magic for deadly fevers.

Zulaykha had fled with her child at the first fear of danger. As none would take her in she returned to the harem. But she ran with her babe and screamed whenever she caught sight of Jeppa. Aletra wanted to help nurse the sick boy, but the mother would not let her.

"Keep thy strength," she said, "for Zulaykha may need thee."

So through the days and the nights that followed Jeppa nursed her first-born alone, with a mother's

endurance, strengthened his weak frame with a mother's prayers, fed his fainting soul with a mother's love. She said the beautiful prayers of the Koran unceasingly, while she cooled his fevered body and led his delirious ravings into the mellow chant of the muezzin.

On the night of the third day Allah hearkened to her prayer and a great peace fell upon her. And she slept beside the low couch of her son. When she awoke it was day, but before turning toward the boy she bowed herself in prayer, saying: "In the joy of my heart I thank thee, O Allah, who art most great, most compassionate, that thou hast saved my first-born unto me, that thou hast given him healing sleep."

And when she turned it was even as she had said. The boy slept, and his brow was damp and cool and unclouded. From that day he mended, and there was great rejoicing, not only in the harem, but among all the people—for Hamed was the only one that had recovered of the many stricken.

And Jeppa told them all of what she had done with the powder—but she gave the praise to Allah. The people were divided in their faith. There were those who said, "It was the hand of Allah that mixed the potion. The works of Allah are mighty and incomprehensible. No man may understand them."

Again there were those who said: "She hath offered herself to Allah in place of the boy, and he hath had compassion upon her."

But miracle or not, if any fell ill they sent for a sup of the blessed draft, as they called the mixture she had given the child.

Very often Jeppa went herself to the sick. Zulaykha would scream with rage on her return, forbidding her

to even look at her little Hafiz lest he be contaminated. But Jeppa continued going, and many of the sick recovered. Whether they had the plague or not was to be questioned, but the effect upon the people was the same as if they had.

Aletra asked her one night: "Dost thou not think that many are sick with fear?"

"It may well be," admitted Jeppa.

"The gentleness of thy face healeth them—thy quiet faith."

"I know not, O my Eyes; but when the fear left me the fever left Hamed."

"Would that I had such power!" sighed Aletra.

"When thou art a mother Allah will give it unto thee."

"And doth being a mother make up all other loss?"

"All other. It is what Allah hath made us for—that we might know the fullness of joy."

"But the love of man——"

"The love of man is but a step that leadeth to the paradise of mother-bliss."

"I do not understand."

"Nay, but some happy day thou wilt. Then will the smile of the master be less to thee than the cry of thy child."

Just then little Zema came into the harem. Her face was flushed, and she moved heavily toward her mother.

"I thirst," she said.

Jeppa gave her water, and she asked for more. And the mother-heart grew fearful as she nestled her close against her breast.

"Give her unto me," said Aletra.

"Nay! Nay!" cried the child. "None but thou, mama—none but thou!" And she clung to Jeppa.

As they spoke a man leading a camel stopped before the outer wall. He was a trusted Soudanese servant of the Sultan, and brought a command that Jeppa come at once to the seraglio, bringing with her "the holy draft."

"The Ranee (the favorite) of the Commander of the Faithful is stricken and hath heard of the magic of the potion," he said. "I bring a camel, for we go not by the road lest the evil of the plague be in the dust. Bid her come at once and bring with her the holy draft."

When Zulaykha brought the message Jeppa's face grew white. Zulaykha knew not that little Zema was ill, as she often nestled in her mother's arms. But Aletra knew what was passing in Jeppa's heart and answered for her:

"Bid him refresh himself, Zulaykha, that Jeppa may have fair time to make ready. Give him dates and honey-cakes and milk, that he grow not impatient."

"And why should *I* do this?" retorted Zulaykha. "*Thou* canst do it, an thou wilt."

"Nay, why wilt thou not?" from Aletra.

"I have the master's child to think of."

"But," pleaded Aletra, "I cannot—for I go to help Jeppa make ready and to nurse little Zema, who is stricken of a fever."

"Stricken sayest thou!" screamed Zulaykha; "stricken! Then should she fare forth with her mother."

"Peace, Zulaykha!" spoke Jeppa over the restless form of the child. "Go feed the messenger and give him drink and beguile him for a time while I pray."

The voice of the muezzin chanting in a monotonous refrain broke in on the discussion:

"Allah hu Ak Bar! Allah hu Ak Bar!"

This over, Zulaykha turned and fled into the outer court.

"Thou canst not go, O Jeppa!" said Aletra when they were alone.

"How disobey?"

"He hath never seen thy face. The ladies of the harem also have never seen thy face."

"And what then?"

"I will go in thy place."

"Thou?"

"Yea. Thou shalt give me of thy precious draft, and I, too, shall pray as thou hast prayed."

"It is not within the possible."

"Yea, it is. My speech shall be calm and slow and soft—even as thine; and I will mock thy gentle nature till thou shalt not know me."

"I thank thee," began Jeppa, shaking her head.

"I will pray," continued the girl, not heeding Jeppa's interruption, "I will pray—so may I purge away my sins as well."

"The master—I could never lift mine eyes to his again if aught befell thee," she objected.

"Danger is here also," Aletra said, "and protection is for the faithful wherever Allah is."

"But Zulaykha?"

"Will never venture near thee. Fear will keep her far distant."

Jeppa took counsel with herself and was silent.

"No, I cannot be unfaithful to the care the master hath given me of thee," she answered at last—the cold

drops standing upon her brow like dew upon a lily. "Take thou my child," she continued bravely, "and do thy woman's part. So shall she yet smile upon us."

"O Jeppa, dost thou so trust me?"

"Yea, for the mother in thee but sleepeth. It will wake to meet my Zema's need. I fear not."

With this she tried to loosen the child's feverish hold upon her shoulder, but she clung the tighter, entreating with blazing eyes: "Mama, mama!"

"Go thou, Zema, to Aletra," said Jeppa coaxingly.

"Nay, I want but thee, but thee," she screamed, "mama, mama!"

Each word tore the mother's heart grown weaker with longing to surrender, as again and yet again she tried to loosen the hold of the little fingers.

"Thou wilt kill thy child, Jeppa. Hearken to the wisdom of my words or we shall all perish and none be here to give the master welcome."

Jeppa struggled a moment with her soul; then said faintly:

"So be it; but lift not thy veil even while thou stayest in the harem, for thou art beautiful and the eunuch hath eyes."

"Had I but some disfiguring stain!" exclaimed Aletra.

"What meanest thou?"

"I should make my face so unholy to look upon that any man who beheld it would fly from me."

"But thou hast not time. Hasten and let me clothe thee and veil thee, for I hear him walking in his impatience. Zulaykha hath not done that which we bade her."

With haste and trembling the two women made their

way to Jeppa's part of the harem. Little Zema, still clasped in the arms of her mother, lay like a wilted flower after the storm of her emotion.

Jeppa put the child upon her own bed and flitted here and there with great rapidity, giving advice and cautioning the other of many things. She filled a small glass with the healing draft, giving directions as she shook the flask and looked to see if the powder was melted. But always she ended with the words: "Allah alone hath wrought the healing. Most great and compassionate is Allah!" And again: "Give the draft that the favorite be not displeased with thee; but pray that thy fears and her fears may be at rest and all will be well."

Before the hour was out Aletra stood beside the camel. Zulaykha had vanished in dread. Hamed had been sent away with a kinsman's caravan to the far distant Village of the Weavers, where dwelt his father's people. Zittarra had been sent to another kinsman. So there was none to know that it was not Jeppa that fared forth.

CHAPTER VI

"IF THE RANEE DIE, O ALLAH!"

THE tossing and rocking of the camel gave Aletra scant time to think; but of one thing she tried to assure herself: the new character which she was attempting to assume. For it was possible that Jeppa's wonderful serenity was known at the seraglio.

"Thou art Jeppa. Thy speech must be soft and slow, and thy words prayerful," she told herself in the pauses of the fearful rocking. "Thou art Jeppa."

They traveled slowly, on account of the stones that had fallen in many places. But the great Sudanese who had been sent for her seemed to know every foot of the way, and guided the camel with much care.

As they entered the seraglio there was much whispering and running to and fro of slaves. Then Babek, the tremendous eunuch in charge of the harem, came and conducted her into the presence of the Sultan.

The Commander of the Faithful reclined upon a low divan of carved olive-wood, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and jewels, and spread with rugs of Oriental magnificence. Fear was in his face as he clasped and unclasped his hands nervously.

"Hast thou a draft to heal the plague? Speak thou the truth!" he commanded.

"That say I not," Aletra made answer slowly, tak-

ing the manner of Jeppa as closely as she could. "Who am I to know the will of Allah?"

"Is it Allah or the draft that healeth?" he asked impatiently.

"Without Allah would be no draft—no Sultan—no ranee—no Jeppa."

"Thy speech hath reverence, as becometh a good woman," he commended; then added: "Lift thy veil."

"My master hath ever taught me to obey the voice of the rulers and those in high places, O mighty Sultan; but, as thou desireth that I heal the princess, let no man look upon my face lest my power be gone—not even the eunuch that watcheth over the harem."

"Why not he? He is not a man."

"Nay, but perchance he hath been, in some life long since burned to ashes."

"Art thou, then, so beautiful as to stir the memory of the dead?"

"I—beautiful!" she cried in the sad voice of Jeppa. "Mock me not, O Sultan, lest I fail; but fetch me straightway unto the lady, that I may compose myself for her sake."

"So shall it be," he answered, clapping his hands for the slaves, who stood apart. "And if she be restored to me, thou shall not have cause to say Omar hath stinted in his guerdon. Seest thou this jewel?" he continued, showing a great sapphire set in a ring of dull Egyptian gold.

"This will I give thee—and a necklace, with pearls as large as the eggs of birds."

"Nay, O Commander of the Faithful!" began Aletra, but he stopped her, saying:

"Thou shalt be rich; and any honor within my gift shall be thine for the asking."

"Allah is merciful, O Most Gracious Master," she answered speaking slowly and evenly, as Jeppa might, choosing her words with wisdom. "Yet wait till I have saved the princess; and while thou art waiting, hold no unholy thought—wrong no man; think of no woman; and walk with Allah alone.

"So shall it be the easier for me; for the master and the wife are one flesh, and the honor of one is the praise of the other. So that if Allah look with favor upon thee, even so shall the princess find favor in his sight."

Having spoken, she turned to the waiting slaves, and said:

"Lead me to the princess."

Though the Sultan had given no word of command, they obeyed her as one having power. And, bowing low, she left his presence. But when once away, she shook as with the palsy from fear, and gave thanks to Jeppa for bidding her keep her veil drawn even when with the women.

"If the ranee die, O Allah, what will befall me?" she asked herself, and grew cold with fear.

CHAPTER VII

THE PRINCESS AND THE POTION

THE princess lay upon a low couch. About her were wrappings of embroidered silk. The couch was golden, and there were many cushions and soft rugs. The veil about her shoulders and her garments shone like cobwebs in the sunshine; yet, though bright in color—gold, saffron, amber—they shaded one into the other. The air was heavy with many spices, and incense twigs burned on a copper brazier, making the air dense with aromatic mist.

The princess—low-browed and tinted like the olive when it is ripe from the kiss of the sun—was beautiful beyond any woman Aletra had ever beheld. Her women were grouped about her in fear and despair; but as Aletra entered, their cry of joy! *"Lu-lu-lu-u-u!"* echoed through the harem. They cried the *Zagharee!* for did they not consider her as sent from Allah to save them as well as the ranee?

Aletra, though, who had seen both Hamed and little Zema when they first fell ill, knew, as soon as her eyes rested upon the favorite, that she was but sore afraid, and not stricken of the plague.

"O Allah, be merciful and send me the blessed draft before it is too late," the princess was moaning as she entered. Then, her eyes falling upon Aletra, she well

nigh strangled in her frenzy as she demanded: "Hast thou the draft? Haste, haste! Give it unto me that I may drink, and woe betide thee if it easeth me not!"

But Aletra, knowing that she was nigh unto madness, was loath to give the small flagon which she had brought lest the ranee quaff it at a draft and grow restless if her fears did not vanish speedily. So she answered, with the even sweetness of Jeppa's tone that she tried ever to remember:

"Art thou in haste to enter paradise, O Princess?"

"Nay, so waste not thy time with words—but give me the potion," answered the ranee angrily.

"Thou shalt take it, but as I give it thee," said Aletra.

The favorite looked upon her in silent rage. She paid no heed, but continued speaking evenly, as might Jeppa:

"It is so potent that a sup too much, and thou wert beyond my help."

At the command, in the quiet, fearless voice, the princess would have torn the veil from Aletra's face, or otherwise humiliated her; but she did not, because of her fear. So, rolling her great eyes, she screamed:

"Then, why dost thou not give it me? Why delayest thou? I scarcely breathe, and the measure of my heart is growing weak!"

Aletra did not answer, but bade the slaves bring her cups and vessels. With care, she poured a few drops of the liquor into a cup, placed it in another vessel, and surrounded it with water. Then she waited in silence to gain time and cast the spell of the unknown upon the waiting women.

She was still trembling with fear, when the call to

evening prayer fell upon the huddled group, *"Allah hu Ak Bar! Allah hu Ak Bar!"*

He who called the prayer was near at hand. Instantly, as if possessed of a single body, the women prostrated themselves. Aletra turned to do the same, when the Princess rose and clutched her garments, crying:

"Thou shall not pray to Allah till thou hast given me the draft. Canst thou not see that I perish?"

Then Aletra raised her hand and said in soft reproof:

"Hearken! Dost thou not hear, O Ranee, that there is none greater than Allah?"

And though she did not prostrate herself, as the angry princess still stood beside her, she chanted the call in even accents with the muezzin.

After the call had ceased she chanted slowly from the Koran, for protection from evil and darkness and death, ending with:

"In the name of the Prophet, by the sun and its rising greatness, by the moon when it followeth him, by the day when it showeth its splendor, by the night when it covereth him with darkness, by the heaven and Him who built it, by the earth and Him who spread it forth, by the sea and Him who formed it; spread thou thy healing over the house of him who leadeth the Faithful, and speak the word of healing and of peace!"

Under the spell of her voice the princess grew calm. When she had finished, Aletra gave the potion, saying:

"Drink, O Princess, well beloved one—and may Allah make thee whole, that thou mayst delight the heart of the Master."

The favorite took it like a child, despite its bitterness. Having swallowed the medicine she sank back among her cushions and closed her eyes.

A beautiful slave girl crept timidly toward the couch, composed the amber wrappings, and covered her mistress's feet with a silken rug.

There was silence, as if they waited for the miracle. Drawn faces were turned toward Aletra as if toward a prophetess who possessed the power of magic. For had she not covered Fatma, the princess, with confusion and made her as a little child? Was she not the visible redeemer from the plague, should they be stricken? Then, too, she had not lifted her veil. Mystery enveloped her as darkness does the night. So serene and high she seemed to them that they were ready to cast themselves at her feet and seek protection from the scourge, and but for the presence of the ranee they would have done so.

Aletra, behind her veil, was praying Allah to take her safely away from the seraglio, and thinking how she could save the precious liquor, for Jeppa would sorely need it if little Zema were ill long. So Aletra thought and prayed in the heavy silence.

The princess appeared to sleep; the women scarce drew their breaths. She had turned so that her back was toward the women, and lay facing Aletra. Her peaceful breathing led them to believe that she slept.

But when Aletra turned her head to arrange her veil, she found the great dark eyes full upon her, and a strange new sense of danger, as of being in the power of some beast of the wilds, made her knees to totter beneath her. All control seemed to be slipping away, and a weakness caused her to tremble.

"Allah, Allah, Allah!" she cried in the stillness of her heart, "protect thou me from the eyes of those that hate!"

She uttered no word of the prayer, but stood like a

young prophetess, with arms upraised till the calm of heaven fell upon her. And when the hour had passed thus in silence, she said softly to the young slave girl:

"Bring unto me the cup. The time cometh for another potion."

"So soon, O Jeppa?" sighed the princess, as if just awakened.

"Every hour," Aletra made answer.

"Throughout the night?" asked the favorite.

"Throughout the night," she was answered.

"Wilt thou tarry, or leave the draft with my women?"

"I will tarry."

"How long?"

"Till thou art whole."

"And when shall that be?"

"At midday prayer on the morrow."

"How knowest thou that? Hast thou not said none is greater than Allah?"

"Yea; and for that he is Allah, thy life shall be spared."

"And my women?"

"They are not stricken."

"Nay, not now; yet they be within the hour."

At this there was a rising, horrified murmur from the crouching group.

"They may well be, O prophetess; for is not the plague in the harem? By what magic should they escape when even I lie stricken?"

"None but the Most Great may say who shall be stricken and who go free, O princess!"

"Yet would it be well to have thee close," said Fatma.

Aletra made no answer, but consumed much time in

preparing the medicine. Her measured movements angered the favorite.

"Canst thou not hasten the brewing, O messenger of the prophet? See, I faint again. Abla! Abla! Haste!" she screamed to the beautiful slave girl. "Feel thou my heart. It pulseth, it pulseth! Oh, I fear—I fear I shall perish!"

At this there was great confusion, crying, and moaning among the women. Four slaves supported the raving princess, while Aletra held the potion to her lips. This time the features were distorted because of the bitterness of the cup.

"Thou hast doubled the dose," she cried as she drew her brows together.

"Nay, it is the same," assured Aletra.

The princess again appeared to sleep, and again observed Aletra through lowered lids. All through the night, at every watch, Aletra gave her a few drops of the draft.

At the sunrise call to prayer the stricken one was so exhausted that she slept, and Aletra gave thanks in her heart, for this was what she had prayed for—an hour, even a few blessed moments, when she could be free from the gaze of those half-closed eyes and the fear that oppressed her.

The call of the muezzin ceased, and as the women rose softly she turned to them, and said:

"If thy mistress stir so much as an eyelid call ye me."

And when they had assured her with awe in their glances, she folded herself in a rug and lay down to rest.

The vigil of the night had made her eyes heavy, and before the women had rolled the ends of the rug about her feet she slept. Hour after hour passed, and neither

awoke. It was at the close of the midday prayer that Abla, the slave girl, who alone had kept awake, tried to arouse Aletra.

"Who art thou?" she asked, startled from a familiar dream of Jeppa and Zulaykha by the girl's touch, at the same time throwing off her veil. Then suddenly she remembered and, quickly covering her face, asked:

"How fareth it with the princess?"

"She still sleepeth," answered the girl. "But Babek, the chief eunuch, craveth speech with thee."

"What is thy name, girl?" whispered Aletra.

"Abla, O most beautiful one!" softly breathed the girl.

"Abla, an thou wouldst have thy freedom, say not to any that I am fair. Say that my face hath a grievous distemper."

"Why should I so belie thee, O prophetess?"

"Nay, thou canst say that my heart is good. A good heart hath never yet tempted the flesh."

Instantly the girl understood through that unwritten knowledge that women have of one another.

"Thou wouldst away—thou fearest the Sultan?" she whispered as Aletra secured her veil. "Then let not Babek see thy face, but show thyself unto the princess. So may she be healed the sooner that thou mayst away. Thinkest thou, O lady, that she hath been stricken?" the girl added very low.

"Nay—stricken of fear alone."

"I care not for my freedom, O Jeppa—but to live in the light of thy heavenly countenance——"

Just then the princess moved, and Abla flew to her side. Aletra went to the door, where Babek awaited her.

"The most gracious master hath commanded me to

fetch thee to him that he may have word concerning the princess."

As he spoke he bent from his great height, as if speaking to a child, and his eyes sought to penetrate the shelter of her veil.

"Say unto him," Aletra made answer, "that the malady mendeth slowly, but that I dare not leave her for the space of a moment."

Babek waited, as if loath to carry her words; then turning, went his way.

Aletra thought to get away by evening prayer; but the princess was perverse, begged her to lift her veil, threatened, then coaxed her. Failing in every way to penetrate the protecting *haik*—which hid not only the face, but the entire figure of the mysterious prophetess—she turned her wrath upon Abla, and had her banished from her presence and beaten by order of Babek, to whom she sent complaints.

It was only at midnight, after sore trials of her patience, weary and sick with fright, that Aletra left the princess for a few hours to go to the room set apart for her, that she might close her eyes in sleep. On the way she asked the slave, who led her:

"Canst thou send the girl, Abla, to me?"

And the slave answered, prostrating herself:

"Yea, O prophetess! I will rouse her straightway and send her unto thee. Hast thou any further command?"

"None. Rise and carry thy message swiftly unto Abla."

"I go," said the woman, rising; and a moment later she disappeared as silently as glides the cobra in the shadows of the jungle.

CHAPTER VIII

ALETRA AND THE SLAVE GIRL

ALETRA had never seen a place of so much magnificence as the room that had been set apart for her. It was even richer than that occupied by the princess.

The door, which she closed hastily when the slave disappeared, was of cunningly carved olive-wood. The golden bed was enormous, and covered with beautifully wrought designs of shining pearl, designs of lotus blossoms and half-human flowers of paradise that never bloomed on earth—the imaginings of some artist enamored of the fantastic mysteries of the blest abode, but not quite willing to abandon the subtle inspiration of human womanhood.

This Tunisian bed was piled with silken fabrics of different tints, from the faintest blush of dawn to the deepest rose and saffron, all heavy with embroidery. The rugs were woven of pure silk, and were as thick from one side to the other as a man's hand; and the perfume that had been spilled upon them was made of the souls of flowers, and would last a century.

The walls were covered with silks, embroidered in fanciful arabesques, so wonderful in their harmony that the whole seemed like a leaf from the books of paradise.

Aletra loved beauty; and though spent with watching and fright, while her limbs scarce sustained her and her eyes ached from looking through the veil so long, she could not smother a cry of delight as she touched the shimmering fabrics.

Throwing herself upon the great bed, in the heart of the silken billows, she began to loosen her veil, the better to drink in the beauty about her. She sighed:

"Here need I not act the part of Jeppa. Here am I Aletra once again."

She lifted the heavy veil, but sprang up quickly and covered her face to admit Abla, who had called softly at the door. The girl's eyes were swollen with weeping, for Babek had been merciless; but the look of idolatry filled them as she crossed the threshold.

"I am come, O lady," she said.

"Enter and make fast the door," Aletra answered.

Abla was the daughter of a Berber who had fallen in battle before one of the desert cities. After her father's death she was sold into slavery, and became one of the attendants upon the ladies of the harem.

"I would not close mine eyes till I knew thou wert here to guard the door," Aletra began in her own warm, caressing voice, with no trace of Jeppa's calmness. With this she again threw off her veil and dark *haïk,* and raised her round, young arms in their freedom. Abla gazed upon her in wordless astonishment at the perfection of her beauty.

"Thou art as lovely as the springtime," she gasped; "but thou art wearied unto death. Let me unbind thy garments and soothe thee to sleep."

"Mine eyes crave sleep. But there is something here"—putting her hand to her brow—"that will not

let me sleep. I fear—O Abla, I fear the princess!" she said rapidly. "Why doth she delay my journeying forth? I fear Babek also, and the Sultan."

"It is but that thy spirit is worn, O lady, and causeth thee to tremble at naught. I will watch the rest of the night while thou sleepest." Abla made answer softly, at the same time loosening the other's garments with silken touch. "And who shall say," she continued, "that she may not bid thee depart laden with jewels?"

"Thy words hold comfort and wisdom, but I would I were a bird that I might fly through the casement and away to mine own."

So they talked far into the night, Abla ever comforting as she poured perfumed water from a brazen ewer upon her hands, and soothed the other's tired limbs, saying ever and again:

"Thou art more beautiful than the princess. Yea, an hundredfold, an hundredfold!"

Aletra's fears grew less; she slept, almost. The girl's voice was like music as she murmured:

"Allah give thee sleep, O lady, and make thee to smile in thy dreams, while Abla watcheth."

Her praises and prayers were so blended into a lullaby that at last sleep came. Then, moving very softly, the little slave made a pallet beside the door and laid herself gently upon it. Twice in the hours that followed she thought she heard footsteps, but bravely told herself it was but the spirit of darkness knocking at the door of restless hearts.

So passed the second night in the harem of the Sultan.

CHAPTER IX

ZULAYKHA COMES UPON A SECRET

It was midday in the harem of Attar al Hassen; there was no sign of life in the little garden or the court; yet the evidence of inhabitants gave to the place a subtle suggestion that the insensate objects—tabourets, rose jars, divans, cushions—all the intimate paraphernalia of domestic life, were but holding their breath, suspending their usefulness in an hour of supreme tension. The personality of inanimate things, which is sometimes as forceful, as compelling or repelling, as if possessed of sensate bodies hovered about the abode.

It was the fourth day since Aletra's departure for the seraglio. The psychic atmosphere of the little harem court was one of suspense, fear, acute waiting. Zulaykha, who entered at this hour, felt it subconsciously but fully. Her face was blanched with fear, and as she stepped cautiously she looked about, as if, mayhap, danger might be lurking near.

It was the first time she had ventured to go to Jeppa's room since Zema was stricken. For she had told herself many times: "If Jeppa come not back from the seraglio and Aletra sicken caring for Zema, I alone will be left to welcome the master."

Though she did not allow herself to dwell upon this prospect, there were moments when it almost grew

into a hope; and these moments yielded satisfaction. Again she reasoned: "I have the care of the master's child. Is it not meet that I, who have borne him and still suckle him, should avoid all danger?" So she had gone into the little kiosk and made it tight against the winds of night, and lived there wholly for her child and herself.

But despite all her care Hafiz grew restless, and when she felt his little body unnaturally cold or warm against her breast, she became frenzied with fear.

"Oh, that Jeppa had not gone to the seraglio," she moaned. At last, tortured with anxiety for her child, she ventured into the little court. Hearing no sound, she crept closer to Aletra's room. Added to her fear of the plague, was the possibility that Aletra might need help for Zema or herself, and that if she refused and the master heard ever of it, he would divorce her in his anger. Still again, had she not the preceding wife's hatred in her heart against Aletra? All powerful reasons; but above them, and setting them quite aside, was her mother-instinct. This, and this alone, made it possible for her to quiet her trembling and take the first step into the harem. Having entered, she was in an agony of indecision. "Oh, could I but see where Aletra keepeth the draft," she thought. "I could steal hither and take it for Hafiz."

As she stepped upon the rug a cushion fell from a divan. She was so startled that her heart almost stopped beating. It was the same on which Aletra always sat when Attar was at home. Now, as it fell almost at her feet, a wave of anger crimsoned her face and she spurned it with the tip of her slipper.

The action had been without thought or direction; but when she saw that the cushion lay like a crushed thing

against the master's rug, seeming to have sought protection in its heavy folds, she shuddered as at an omen. And as if the inanimate object had accused her, she picked it up and replaced it on the divan.

Her steps were stealthy, as if the stillness of the place were sleep from which it might awaken at any moment and behold her with its hundred eyes. Stealing so quietly along the familiar place like a silent-footed wraith over its former haunts, she reached the door of Aletra's room. Very softly she opened it; first a little way, then further till she saw that there was no one within.

Aletra's veil lay over one end of the bed; otherwise the room was in perfect order; but it had that inexplicable character of the unused, unoccupied habitation. Zulaykha felt rather than understood this quality, and a fierce, wild joy welled up in her heart—a joy that she did not need to define.

Emboldened by the vacant room, she took her steps with less caution, and overturned a rose-jar. The next moment Jeppa stood before her.

"Jeppa, thou!" she cried.

"Yea; but why comest thou hither, O Zulaykha?"

"Hafiz, O Jeppa, hath been restless, and I fear——"

"Yea," interrupted the other, "thou fearest. That is thy weakness. Yet it is thy strength as well, else naught would have brought thee hither."

"An I had thought thou wert here, I had come sooner."

"I thank thee," returned Jeppa, but without warmth. This feeling of repulsion toward Zulaykha's friendly advances had always filled her gentle heart with self-reproach.

"When didst thou return?" asked Zulaykha, and

almost in the same breath she questioned again: "And where is Aletra?"

The first wife came closer to her and, looking into her eyes, answered:

"O Zulaykha, I will tell thee all. Aletra hath fared forth in my place that my Zema a mother's care might have; yet——"

Here the Egyptian interrupted her. Speaking of Zema reminded her of Hafiz; and without even asking how it fared with the other's child she almost demanded:

"Give me of the draft. I cannot tarry lest my child become fretful in my absence."

"The draft——" began Jeppa, but again the other interrupted:

"Yea, the draft! Thou darest not refuse it to the master's child. Is he not the same to him as thy Hamed?"

"Thou art welcome to the draft," said the other sadly. "Yet would I tell thee that it hath no virtue, for Zema mendeth not and my heart is sore afraid."

"Thou—art—afraid?" said Zulaykha in amaze, for her reliance had been upon the draft.

Jeppa made no answer, but fetched the draft and divided it, and gave her a small flagon. And Zulaykha turned and swiftly left the room. But even as she sped back to the kiosk with the draft held close to her breast, she thought of the master's return, and reflected that if Aletra still tarried in the seraglio, she would once more be the pride of Al Hassen's harem.

But within the hour Hafiz was truly stricken, and she forgot the master in the master's child.

CHAPTER X

PRYING EYES IN THE NIGHT

THE princess was even more capricious the next day. She was entirely healed of her fear of the plague, but sought to torment Aletra in a thousand ways to draw from her the secret of the miraculous potion. The day after it was the same; and the next day, and the next. Each night found Aletra a little less confident, and her fears grew. The ministrations of Abla alone saved her from sinking utterly. Day after day the favorite refused to let her go forth.

Abla slept much in the day, as she had been set apart to serve the prophetess. But at night she kept a faithful watch, for there was something more than the spirit of the night abroad in the court of the harem of Al Haroun.

Another thing Abla noticed—every day some beautiful object was added to Aletra's room. The silver ewer was replaced by a golden one. The bronze lamp disappeared, and in its place glowed a crystal zone with intricate chasing. Every day there were flowers, perfumes, delight—a kind of candy-paste, with alluring foreign flavoring—and many other things to tempt or please a woman.

"Hast thou seen this?" asked Abla one night, holding out a shimmering shawl of dull blue with embroideries and copper.

"Wonderful!" cried Aletra, enraptured. "A year's patience hath not wrought such a shawl," she continued as she wound it about her slim young body in delight.

"It may well have taken two years. Look, the stitches are as fine as weaving!" exclaimed the little maid, examining it with admiration.

"And what is this," asked Aletra, lifting a filmy Oriental dress—silken blouse and trousers—of faintest pink from the divan. "Who hath brought this hither? And these?" she asked as she pointed to the dazzling beauty of many silken garments.

"I know not, O lady; but it must be by order of the master."

"The Sultan?" gasped Aletra. "Ah, he hath much gratitude in his heart for that I have saved the princess."

Abla looked long into the eyes of her mistress, then answered:

"Nay, I think Babek sent them."

"And why?" questioned Aletra.

"Soft raiment, and gold and silver, and perfume and sweets for the tongue are to women more than a far-away master."

"What meanest thou, Abla?"

"O lady, look not upon thy servant with so dark a cloud upon thy brow, lest she perish."

"Thou answerest me not. Speak."

"And thou wilt not chide me?"

"Thou hast my word."

"Then, most beautiful one—whose hair is like unto the woven dreams of a moonless night, whose flesh is like unto the fabric of rose-leaf, whose eyes are soft as a young deer's in mating time, whose——"

"Have done," interrupted the other. "That is nó answer."

"With thy beauty," persisted the girl unheeding, "thou canst well be the favorite of the harem."

"I am the wife of Attar," Aletra answered simply. "Foolish Abla, these tempt not me," touching lightly the garments and the shawl about her shoulders. "And again," she continued, smiling, "thou forgettest the princess."

"Her sun would be set forever, and thou wouldst reign over the harem in gentleness for many a year."

Aletra shook her head in protest.

"Think well, O lady, over the words of thy slave who would die for thee."

Suddenly Aletra put her finger to her lips.

"Hast heard aught, Abla?" she whispered, scarce breathing.

"Nay, not now," said the girl, listening. "But often in the night."

"Whence did it come? Should there perchance be an opening beyond the hangings in the wall, 'twere easy to look through the jewels in the tapestry."

"Then would thy beauty be no secret."

They listened for hours, but heard no sound save the muezzin's call to midnight prayer floating softly on the windless night.

"On the morrow," whispered Aletra, "I go forth—and none shall stay me. But to-day I said unto her that word should be sent to the Sultan that she was healed."

"What answer made she?"

" 'An thou dost,' she said, 'I will throw myself into such frenzy of torment that he will not believe thee.' "

"O lady, an thou wouldst go forth on the morrow, thou hast but to show the princess thy face—and she will be healed, and send thee right speedily!"

The next day, being the eighth day since Aletra had come to the palace, she made ready to depart.

Entering the presence of the favorite, she said calmly:

"To-day I leave thee, O princess, to return unto my people."

"Thou sayest bravely," she answered. "I am not yet sound, and thou hast not given me the secret of the draft—nor yet have I seen thy face. Art thou a man, that thou hidest thyself from women?"

"Let all but thee depart, O lady, and I will show thee my face," Aletra made answer.

The princess clapped her hands.

"Go forth—even to the last one," she commanded, "and make fast the doors."

Aletra was clad in the garments of tinted silk that she had found in her room, and looked like a rose in delicate pink bloom. When she threw off the dark *haik* and veil that enveloped her, she stood forth a dream of exquisite beauty. Fatma sprang from the divan like a great cat.

"What art thou—a houri from paradise?" she asked.

Aletra smiled and answered:

"I am a woman, anhungered for the sight of mine own people. Wilt thou let me go, O princess?"

"I can deny thee nothing," the other sighed. "Wilt thou go in the evening, or now, so that thou mayst be with thy people at nightfall prayer?"

"It would delight my heart, O lady, to go within the hour," Aletra answered.

Then the favorite took from her arm a bracelet of Egyptian gold, jeweled and carved like a serpent, and gave it to her.

"Now, wrap thy *haik* well about thee—and cover thy face well; and let not Babek see thee. And thou canst go. I am healed."

"Wilt thou, O princess, send such word unto the master, the defender of the faithful, that I need not vex him with my presence?" said Aletra.

The favorite looked long into her eyes and questioned:

"Thou lovest thine own master?"

"Thou art a sorceress, O lady. Thou art right."

The other laughed.

"Then go—and may Allah guard thee safely to thine own people. I will send such word to the master as will speed thee on thy journey without delay."

Within the hour Aletra was ready to depart; but Babek brought the commands of the Sultan that she come before him.

CHAPTER XI

A HOURI FROM PARADISE

A GREAT change had come in the inner court of the Sultan's harem since the day Aletra came to the palace.

The tiny stream that ran through it, and that had been silent then, now purled with musical insistence over barriers of coral, and diverged here and there into confining banks of carved marble. The long leaves of the Egyptian lotus showed dark green against the Parian whiteness; and in quiet little pools hundreds of small iridescent fish disported themselves.

Further back were divans of carved mother-of-pearl, of teak and olive-wood, and of brazen metal, against the walls, which were covered with Tunisian silks wrought in harmonious chromatic scales of color.

At the opening to the different corridors hung heavy silken rugs, softly shaded, pale as the dawn, glowing amber as the desert at noonday under the sun, deep as the shadows that haunt the sacred groves. The lives of many had gone into these rugs—generations of the faithful, from the furthermost parts of Islam—Ispahan, Bokhara, Mecca, holy Khairwan, wherever the muezzin called. As they prayed one prayer—the eternal *"Allah hu Ak Bar! Allah hu Ak Bar!"* so they wrought one harmony into the rugs, with never a discord.

The soft arpeggios of color ran from the deepest bass to the palest flutelike treble, with the softness of exquisite fluency. Along the middle register the chords of blue and pale saffron and rose and amber were entrancing.

The bright daylight from above revealed much that could not be seen the day before; while in the alcoves that had been dark on her arrival the first day, lights of different colors gleamed from lamps of crystal and amethyst and richly jeweled brasses.

Hundreds of birds with bright plumage flitted among the flowering rosetrees from Lebanon, that grew on the banks of the stream and sang or chirped their happiness.

Of a truth, Babek knew how to read the heart of his royal master. Did he sorrow? There were dim lights, few flowers, no birds, silently moving gray-swathed slaves—nothing to contradict or irritate his mood. Did he rejoice as to-day? Hundreds of birds were loosed; the waters were given full flow through the mimic river; flowers without number shed their perfume; Tombouctuan incense twigs burned in dragonlike braziers hundreds of years old, while musk and amber and aloe and cassia, sandal and Turkish ouried mingled in a sensuous symphony.

Beautiful slaves with tinkling armlets and anklets moved like butterflies among the rose foliage, barely touching the floor in their fairy lightness. Also many of the younger women of the harem, from different parts of the world, were brought before him on this day.

There were faces on which the story of desert ancestry was written. Bright-haired Kabyle girls who had dipped their feet in the waters of the Oued Sehou or had run like the deer among the peaks of the Djurdjura

Mountains; beautiful women with the blood of Romans and Greeks and haughty Castilians in their veins; proudly stepping damsels from Damascus. A garden of human flowers sprung from many nations, clad like poppies in multicolored raiment, and tinkling with bracelets and anklets of gold and silver, earrings and belts having many jeweled pendants.

This was a day of rejoicing, for had not the light of the harem smiled once more in the fullness of health? And was it not Babek's province to express his master's delight by ministering to every sense?

There was soft music everywhere, as if emanating from the hearts of the flowers or the moving water of the stream. Little tom-toms sounded like a background beyond the first wall; and the shriek of a hautboy could be heard dimly through many walls.

The Sultan asked for a rose. A dozen nimble feet ran to fetch it. One girl, swifter than the rest—a dancer who had been found in Algeria by the ever-watchful eye of Babek, and brought to the harem—was the first to reach him. Her feet barely touched the ground; and as she flew to him she circled several times upon the rug at his feet, put the stem of the rose in her mouth and bent backward so that the beautiful long curve of her throat lay before him.

But he looked coldly upon her. Again she swung her beautiful body into circles—this time holding the rose in her henna-tinted fingers, and bending so that her lips, red with stain of mesouak, touched his hand, while her kohl-tinted eyes gazed up at him with steady brilliancy. He took the rose and smiled faintly; and the girl withdrew.

Into this Eden of form and color and scent and

sound, Aletra was brought to receive her reward for healing the princess. The rejoicing had begun early. Aletra hardly recognized the court wherein she had tarried so short a time on her arrival; and the face of the commander of the faithful was so changed from the fear-stricken one she remembered that she was loath to believe it was the same, as he smilingly bade her to come before him.

The something noble that comes from habitual command was in his face, till almost he seemed brave; and his white silk garments fell about him as became one appointed by Allah.

"Here, O prophetess," he said, "is the sapphire I pledged to thee. It hath once been the treasure of a great sorcerer who was wont to work magic by looking into its depths. With it hath he brought before his eye far places, and the image of those he willed came in answer to his call when he looked upon it. And here are pearls.

"And further will I give thee of any goods that thou mayst ask of my hands; for behold the princess hath sent me a rose, and in its heart she hath thrust a scroll, saying, 'I am as a bird in the springtime, calling unto its mate. My body is healed, and my heart calleth for thee.' I rejoice in thy magic, O Jeppa."

Aletra took the glittering jewels and could not subdue a cry of delight. This pleased him, for he was in happy heart; and he said again:

"What further is thy wish?"

And Aletra made answer:

"The slave-girl, Abla——"

But before she had finished he had waved his hand to Babek, saying: "Bring her."

Then, turning to Aletra, he repeated:

"And what further? Of silken stuffs or rugs, say what thou wilt."

But she feared to tarry, and said modestly:

"Thou hast given enough, O mighty Sultan, and a thousandfold too much."

"Not for the Ranee's life," he assured her.

Then he bade a slave bring shawls of different colors, and rugs, and silver veils, heavy with sequins; and when Abla was brought he bade her carry them for her new mistress.

"And now, *Salaam Alek,* O Jeppa! Thou art a good woman, in whom thy husband and children should rejoice. Allah guard thee and keep thee—thee and thy people."

Then Babek came toward her to take her away into the outer court and set her on her journey. He carried a great bird with bright plumage and an ivorylike beak; and he said to Aletra as he stooped low toward her:

"This is my gift to thee, O prophetess." And he came very close to her.

He held the head of the bird in his hand; but even as he spoke, and as if it had been the beak of the bird, he suddenly plucked the veil from her face.

CHAPTER XII

THE SULTAN'S DECISION

ALETRA tried to cover her face, but the Sultan cried:

"Let be! Let be!" Then turning to Babek: "Depart!" And extending his arm toward the women: "And these also—take them hence!"

Then to Abla, who moved not: "Thou canst wait thy mistress in the outer court."

Babek prostrated himself, but smiled secretly as he turned and led Abla away. When the curtain dropped upon the others, and they were alone, the Sultan commanded:

"Come hither, and tell me why thou hast sought to hide thy face from me."

"For that I have been taught by the Koran that my face and my duty belong to my master."

"Why comest thou not to me?"

Aletra stood with her eyes bent upon the ground, made no answer, nor moved a step.

"Thou art as beautiful as a pomegranate when it is ripening."

Then as he continued to look upon her:

"Thou shalt have thy slaves and all that Omar can give thee—for my heart goeth out to thee. Come hither upon the rug at my feet and lift thine eyes to mine."

Aletra was stricken with a great fear, and the white beauty of her face touched him with a strange compassion, so that he was not wroth with her disobedience. He said after a time:

"Thou wilt not? Then must I e'en come to thee."

But Aletra, fearing him, lifted her head and, looking into his eyes, pleaded with humility:

"O Commander of the Faithful, great and good art thou. Suffer me to go hence with thy blessing. Allah hath heard thy prayers and my prayers—and the princess whose beauty is as glorious as the morning, hath been saved to thee."

The Sultan, while he appeared to be listening, heard not a word—so dazzled was he with the soft, pleading witchery of her eyes. After a time he spoke:

"Yea, thou art a swaying lotus-blossom," he said, as if communing with himself; "a houri escaped from paradise."

With this he rose and came toward her. Aletra fled lightly. He followed, and his eyes were terrible in their intensity. But when he had overtaken her, he held her from him—better to drink in the sight of her beauty. She besought him piteously to send her forth to her people, but he heard not a word.

Fearing to madden him by struggling, she drew away from him, step by step, he following gently. At last he said, holding her hand firmly:

"Harken unto reason. Omar will have what his heart craveth. Are not wives given and taken every day, and no one maketh a cry? I seek not to rob thy husband. He shall have riches and other wives; but thee will I have."

"I am the wife of Attar," said Aletra simply, when

he paused, "and though thou art great, there is one greater than thou, even Allah. The meanest of thy slaves knoweth the obligations of a wife."

"Thy speech charmeth me, as doth thy face, O Jeppa. But thinkest thou thy master will think of thee when he chooseth another wife, and longeth for the day when he may sit beside her on the rug?"

Aletra shuddered as she thought of the daughters of the man from Aka. Seeing this, he smiled and continued:

"Then, when thou art forsaken, perchance wouldst thou come to Omar. But I want not that which another man hath cast aside. I want thee now—to-day. The softest rugs from beyond the desert shall lie at thy feet. Perfume of a hundred Persian rose-gardens shall be distilled for thy delight. Thou shalt have every color of the rainbow cunningly caught in thy silken raiment, and thy jewels shall be worth a king's ransom."

"O Sultan," she began, with proudly lifted head; but he broke upon her speech not ungently:

"Keep silence that Omar may finish. Thou shalt clap thy little hands, and an hundred slaves shall answer to thy pleasure; for thou wilt be the Nourmahal—the pearl of the harem. And what wilt thou give for all this, that delighteth the heart of a woman? Thou wilt but be kind to Omar; thou wilt smile upon him and sing a ghazal for him; thou wilt give him thy lips when thou wouldst have him know the blessedness of paradise. For his heart will be beneath thy sandal, and his will tangles in the meshes of thy hair."

Aletra looked deep and long into the glowing eyes so near her own; and with the world-old knowledge of woman, she felt that it were as easy to turn the course

of the Nile as to change his purpose or touch his heart with pleading or prayer or anger or tears.

So she answered with guile: "Thou art tempting."

And he smiled: "Nay, O Jeppa; I but awaken thy reason."

"But thou art over all the people. What will Islam say? That thou hast stolen another man's wife—yet will they but speak the truth. And I shall be unholy before Allah—a false wife."

"I will buy thee from thy husband after."

"Then, buy thou me first."

"But thou wilt leave me."

"Yea, till thou takest me as wife."

"I cannot let thee hence."

"It is the one way." And Aletra's voice was firm.

"It is my will that thou stayest."

"It is my will that I go hence."

"Which hath the greater power?" laughed the Sultan. "I but plead to please thine ear for that which I can take."

"Yet are there things thou canst not take."

"What can I not take?" he asked, delighted with the spirit of her words.

"My heart."

"Nay; I were a fool to crave it where thy body is so divine," he interrupted.

Not heeding him, she continued:

"Thou canst make me hate thee, but thou canst not make me love thee. Thou canst not paint a smile upon my face, or lift my arms willingly about thy neck, or raise my lips with desire to thine. These things, the warmth and the willingness of my love, are the gifts of my soul."

"Thou speakest with rare wisdom," he answered when he had looked long upon her. "Also knowest thou the heart of a man and that which he craveth. Thou art mine, yet would I know the price of the unseen things that are within thy gift."

Slowly she raised her eyes, and they were filled with innocent trouble.

"O mighty Sultan," she said at last, "'tis but a small boon I ask of thee: The master hath journeyed from Tunis, and there are those within the harem that I love. Suffer me to return thither and wait thy summons, and when thy gracious offer for my poor beauty hath been accepted, then will I return to the seraglio—an thou still desirest me."

"Where fareth thy master?" asked the Sultan.

"How may a woman know? But aught thou sendest to the Bazaar of Nazrullah and Al Hassen will find him right speedily."

"But thy soul asketh of me to lose thee for a time. If thou wouldst but tempt me to do somewhat rash to possess thee! But thou tempest me with thy lips to deny my own, to let thee go. What manner of houri art thou? I will not wait."

"Then why speakest thou of thy heart beneath my sandal, and——"

"It is for love of thee that I will not let thee hence."

"Then, O Sultan, thou wilt have the rose without the perfume, the bird without the song, the woman without her love. Is not the perfume, the song, the love, more than the other—nay, the very soul of pleasure?"

Then, casting aside the black *haik* in which she was

muffled, she stood before him in the full glory of her beauty, as the princess had beheld her.

"Am I worth the waiting?" she asked, with gently lowered head and arm outstretched.

The Sultan gazed upon her with delight, and as he looked she wove the magic of her smile about him till she felt that he grew weak to do her will.

"Is the conquering of a woman's heart as nothing? Will I not know thee for a just man, keeping the law of Islam, of Allah?"

"Yet is it grievous hard, that which thou askest of me."

"Grievous hard?" repeated Aletra, and her brows darkened with anger and her lip curled. "Thou meanest I am not worth a few days or weeks of waiting?"

"Nay, turn not so darkling a brow upon me—thou art worth an eternity of waiting. I shall praise Allah if in paradise there is one like unto thee."

"Now speakest thou from thy princely heart," said the girl, smiling divinely upon him. "Now do I see the richness of thy heart's treasure, that the woman thou lovest shall find."

Her words filled him with pleasure and pride.

"Thou art once more a mighty man," she continued, "strong in justice and the right of Allah; for that thou art willing to do a great deed—to battle with thyself against thyself, and conquer."

She could see that he was giving her words consideration, and straightway began to swathe the silver veil about her shoulders, speaking the while:

"The conquerer hath scant pleasure in the slaves which he taketh in battle; but thinketh of the woman who hath waited him, the woman who counteth the days

and even the nights till she shall behold him, and pour the attar of her heart at his feet."

"Wouldst thou so count the days and even the nights, O Jeppa?"—and his face was gentle, till nearly it seemed beautiful.

"Even so shall I count the hours when I fare forth from thee," she answered.

He looked long into her eyes, and the glory of them made his will grow weak.

As he spoke not, Aletra held the flashing sapphire and pearls toward him.

"And thou dost not trust me, I leave these with thee. And thou knowest well 'tis not within the heart of woman to part with such jewels."

"Nay, take them," he said; "but know, O Rose of the Dawn, thou takest not alone jewels and rugs and silk stuff with thee, but the heart of Omar as well. Be heedful of it; do all thou canst to hasten thy return unto me. And I will send my offer unto thy master this day. In all will I delay my happiness seven days, that I may have the perfume, the song, and the love," he smiled; "but on the morning of the seventh day my slaves will wait before the door of thy house and bring thee again to the seraglio where awaiteth thee royal homage and a Sultan's favor.

"Think not," he said, reading her countenance, "that thy master will refuse. An he would so risk his station, that which I shall offer for thee could no man refuse. I will set him over a desert city and enrich him with lands and slaves and—other wives."

As he spoke the last words, he came nearer, and noting the sudden whiteness of her face, he thought he had affrighted her.

"Meantime, O my pomegranate blossom, the fairest food in my mouth will turn bitter; the flowers will seem faded; the sweetest music will ring discords in my ear."

As he paused, Aletra wound her veils about her.

"But wait," he pleaded. "Before thou swathest thyself in the darkness of thy *haik,* hast thou no gentle favor for Omar, that he, remembering, may feast upon?"

Aletra lifted her round young arms, took his face between her hands, drew it down, and bending lightly toward him, laid her lips upon his brow. Then, before he should detain her, she turned swiftly from his presence out into the court where Abla waited; past Babek, who stared in amaze when he saw her, and toward the great gate.

"Open!" she commanded Babek.

"Doth the commander of the faithful let thee go hence?" he asked.

"An thy life would be easy when I return, thou shouldst obey without question," she answered.

But even as she spoke, a slave ran forward and told him to send her to her people with all possible comfort and state.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE DESOLATE DOVE-COTE

So Aletra's return journey was begun. Tremblingly had she come, lest she suffer if the princess die. Returning, she was rich with jewels. Abla looked wonderingly at her new mistress but questioned not, as became her station. Yet she thought her far from wise to leave the Sultan if he wanted her to stay.

Aletra spoke little. The only thought that smote her and spoiled the happiness of her departure was her deceit of Omar, whose eyes were ever before her as she had looked upon them last. Then she thought of Attar, and straightway forgot the look in the other's eyes.

They returned in a carriage drawn by two white horses. As she neared home, she was enraptured at the thought of seeing Jeppa again; and with the delight of a child pictured herself unfolding the silken shawls and giving to each one—Jeppa, little Zema and Zulaykha and her baby, all should have something. So plainly did she see them all, that she smiled and spoke very softly to Abla.

"Art thou sorry to fare forth from the seraglio? I promised thee to give thee thy freedom an thou wouldst be a friend to me, and now I give it thee."

"And wouldst thou drive me from thy presence, O Jeppa?" cried Abla in despair.

"Nay, thou mayst bide with me—it would grieve me sore to lose thee."

"Then keep thou me as a slave; and if I can serve, though it draw the last breath from my body, thou shalt not find Abla lacking."

"Say not overmuch. Thou little knowest how I may call upon thee," Aletra answered; for the days to come were hidden from her eyes as by a stone wall, and she wished not to think of them, nor to speak of them, till she had taken counsel with Jeppa, in whose wisdom she trusted as a child does in its mother.

"Jeppa would know; Jeppa would make all clear," was her hope.

As they came nearer, so consumed was she with thoughts, and so rejoiced at her freedom and the near prospect of being so soon with Jeppa again, that she took no heed of the gloom on the faces of the men they passed, nor noted the many funerals that were halted on the way to change pall-bearers, that each might have the attendant luck of this office. When they reached the abode of Al Hassen she was amazed to find that the outer door stood open, and when they had entered her amazement grew that none moved about in the court.

She called not, fearing lest any should know that she had gone in place of Jeppa. But, bidding Abla wait in the court, she went alone into the harem.

"Jeppa!" she cried; "Jeppa! It is Aletra, come back."

Getting no answer, she called:

"Zulaykha, Zulaykha!"

Then, "Hamed! Selim!"

But none made answer. No sound came from the men's quarters. She went from room to room, calling each by name. In Jeppa's room there was unusual confusion; in her own, the veil that she had discarded lay as she had thrown it, half on the bed, half on the floor. Jeppa's half-finished embroidery lay upon the cushions.

In Zulaykha's room also there was disorder: an unemptied basin, a litter of Hafiz's little shirts and other clothing. Again she called, but getting no answer she fled to the Salamlik. As she stood upon the threshold, a small door in the outer wall was opened, and Selim entered.

"Aletra! Thou!" he cried, "Allah be praised."

"Have all departed? Speak, O Selim," she commanded. "Why lookest thou upon me thus? Where bide they: Jeppa and Zulaykha and Zema—all?" she besought, laying hold of his garment.

"Jeppa," said the boy, sorrowfully, "Jeppa hath gone to the gardens that Allah hath prepared for all good women. With her have gone Zulaykha—Zema—Hafiz——"

"O Allah! Allah! Allah! Had I but come sooner!" she cried, and she tore her garments and the jeweled veil that covered her face, and beat upon her breast.

Hearing her cry, Abla came from the court where she waited, and Aletra poured the black tidings into the girl's ear.

"Would I had stayed! Would I had perished with them!" she moaned; and she tore away from Abla's ministering hands and listened not to Selim's words of solace, and would not be comforted.

After a time the boy, who in the master's absence was the head of the house, commanded her to stop weeping lest she fall ill.

"Peace," said Abla, in her childish voice that seemed so alien to her words. "Peace. When Allah hath not of joy sufficient to give unto the world, he giveth tears."

Thus admonished, the boy kept silent, and Abla ministered to her mistress. Looking upon Abla, Selim straightened himself to his full height, and arranged his dark *habra,* and even in the moment that she soothed Aletra she saw and was not displeased. So fell the seed of love in the loam of death; and, as it quickened, a thrill of life ran through the house of desolation.

As if a word of comfort had been spoken, Aletra lifted her head from Abla's arm and told of her journey to the seraglio in place of Jeppa.

"And art thou not Jeppa?" asked Abla, wonderingly.

"Nay, therefore am I unconsoled. I trod the path of life, and left her to the black death."

As she spoke, she cried anew in her distress. Selim questioned, but told her not of Zulaykha's word that she, Aletra, had gone right willingly that she might escape the plague when first Zema was stricken. Thus the sin of Zulaykha's tortured heart lay hidden with her soft olive body till she should hear the call to paradise.

"I asked thy freedom, Abla, but to give it thee," she said brokenly at last. "Yet were it best, perchance, that thou return again to the seraglio. Selim, my kinsman, shall take thee hither, an thou willest——"

"Why hold her freedom so lightly?" said Selim, before Abla could answer. "Thou art overborne with the sorrow of the moment. Calm thy fear; I will take

ye both to a place of safety where ye can bide till word cometh from the master."

" 'A place of safety,' sayest thou? A place of safety canst thou not find in all Tunisia wherein to hide me!" she made answer.

"Why sayest thou so?" questioned Selim.

"For that a hundred eyes are upon me. The Sultan desireth me—even now he sendeth an offer to the master—an offer that would tempt any Moslem in Tunisia."

Then she set forth all that had befallen her since Jeppa had sent her forth with the draft—all but the promise to return to the Sultan.

"Then—then——" faltered Selim—"then why hast thou come hither again? Thinkest thou my kinsman will refuse the Sultan? Thinkest thou his life would be worth aught an he were so foolish? Even if thou wouldst turn thy back upon the royal favor."

"Selim," said Aletra, and suddenly she seemed taller of stature, "thou speakest to thy kinsman's wife. And till he bestow her upon another, she will remain as becometh a good woman."

The boy lowered his head, and she spoke again:

"Thou shalt put Abla in a place of safety and go thine own way. I fare forth in the night and seek the desert road—the road which leadeth to Tombouctu and beyond, to the Village of the Weavers, where bideth the master's kinsman."

"I leave thee not," said Abla, and Aletra made answer:

"None shall fare with me, lest they betray me to the eyes that watch."

Then silence fell between them, and they were all sore troubled; for, like a gleam of lightning in the brooding cloud of sorrow, was the danger of opposing the desire of the Sultan. After a time Abla broke the silence, speaking gently:

"Thou, O Selim, art a man! Thou wilt find a way."

"The Village of the Weavers is far," he said to Aletra. "How wilt thou fare?"

Though he spoke to Aletra, he looked at Abla, and the look of a man was in his eyes.

"The Sultan hath enriched me," said Aletra. "And gold buyeth camels and food and shelter."

"Nay, Aletra; thou shalt wait in safety."

"Thou comprehendest not——"

"Yea, well do I comprehend. Harken, the seraglio knoweth thee as Jeppa. As Jeppa hast thou gone hence and returned. *Thou art Jeppa!* An the slaves come on the morrow for word of Jeppa a hundred tongues will tell them she hath perished of the plague, for she hath been taken away within the hour. Bide close; let none see thee; answer not those who beat upon the door when I fare forth."

"And what preventeth the slaves from searching within?" asked Abla.

"Death," said Selim.

"And what preventeth death from finding us here also?"

"Allah," he replied again.

"Yea, Allah alone can help us," responded Aletra.

"Mahmud, the fig merchant, hath had passports for his sisters who perished as did Jeppa. They would have journeyed to the new country. These papers will I ask, and thee, O Aletra, will I send to the master!"

And when Abla had listened to his last words, she saw the wisdom of them and rose lightly from the rug and began dancing about the court, singing the joy song of the Arab women. But Aletra stopped her. Yet, even as she chided her, her own eyes grew large with hope.

"Thinkest thou they watch not the harbor and this house and the bazaar? O Selim, Babek hath eyes in the back of his tarboosh and seeth all things."

"Then shall he see what he shall see, for I will straightway fare into the desert, taking with me two women with double veils and much show of secrecy. Nazrullah, my kinsman's partner, hath bidden me hence e'er he fled Tunis."

"Hath Nazrullah fled?" asked Aletra.

"Yea; many of his household perished, and he hath sent for the Sheik Saoud, to hold the bazaar. I fear not."

Then he added thoughtfully:

"They bring men of medicine, who wear veils like women, and prate of insects so fine thou mayst not see them in the water and the air and the dust, and the Sultan forbiddeth it not, for he dreadeth to offend the Roumi.

"But fools are they all—fools! So many days as is good for him a man may live—and no more. And Allah has counted them and bound them in sheaves, as wheat is bound by the reaper thousands of years before he is born into the world. Knowing this, I fear not. Great is the name of Allah!"

"When farest thou for the ship's papers?" asked Abla.

"Even now," answered Selim.

"The night cometh apace; I should feel greater strength if thou bide within," said Aletra. "Fare forth in the dawning, lest those who should see thee in the night should question thy haste and follow after."

"Hast supped?" asked Abla gently.

"Nay, but little food hath passed my lips since Friday. There is milk within and cakes and dates," he said as if he had forgotten to offer them. "I will fetch them and thou mayst eat."

"Nay," said the girl; "sit thou beside Aletra as befitteth the master's kinsman, and I will serve thee both."

So Abla moved into the gray shadows in the room beyond and found the food upon a long table, and when she had placed it fitly, she returned and set it before them. There were honey cakes and figs and dates and a bowl of goat's milk, and she lit a wrought lamp and brewed coffee; and the odor of the coffee comforted Selim, and he looked upon the girl with great gentleness as she passed back and forth in the soft light. Aletra would not partake of food.

"Thou canst bide in the master's room, thou and Abla," he said; "the plague hath not entered it."

At his words Aletra rose, and, bidding Abla tarry and minister to Selim and refresh herself, she went from the Salamlik. On the threshold she paused.

"On the morrow," said Selim, seeing the torture of fear upon her face—"on the morrow shalt thou and Abla take ship. Thou wilt be a solace to the heart of the master."

"I am loath to bring heavy tidings unto him," said Aletra.

"Nor needst thou; for at dawn, when Murad abu Mahmud, the Syrian fig merchant, began his journey

I gave him word of all that had befallen the house of my kinsman, that he might tell it unto him. He goeth to the place where the master bideth—and such tidings come better from the mouth of a friend than in unthinking script."

"Allah be praised that my tongue bring not the tidings!" said Aletra, and she took her way to the master's room.

When Aletra had made fast the door of the master's room, she threw herself, sobbing, upon the great Tunisian bed. What hath Selim said concerning Attar's safety if he opposed the Sultan? Fear, doubt, anguish, and love tore at her heart till she cried out in her distress:

"Allah, O Allah, let him forswear the lands, the city, the palaces! And Allah, O Allah, the wives—turn his heart toward me or I perish!"

Then, as she sobbed, she saw a white burnoose that Attar often wore on desert journeys or in the cool of autumn evenings, hanging beside the bed. She rose and covered it with kisses and wound it about her. The indefinable individual odor that clung to it, blending with musk, spices, and tambac, comforted her as a living presence. She nestled in its embrace, caressed the folds, and, brushing her soft face against it, she spoke to it as if to the master.

Abla tarried long, for Selim would not suffer her to go. As she tempted him with the food she spoke softly and as if naught were amiss.

But when an hour had passed she rose to go.

"Wilt thou show me the way to Aletra?" she said, and he showed her.

"Lalatic sidi," she said when she stood before the master's door.

"Lalatic sidi," returned Selim; but the boy scarce knew his own voice, so deep and rich it sounded as he said the Arabic good night.

With the dawn Selim fared forth to seek the passports. He had great hope, for never had the government been strict in these matters.

"An all is well I return before the noonday call to prayer," he said at parting. When he had gone, Aletra sighed:

"Far better were it for me and for thee that we fare into the desert, and I pray Allah that he find not the ship's papers. I am sore afraid that we go not hence in the ship. In Sahara one *haik* is as like to another as are the sands under the feet, and many are the places of hiding."

"Comfort thy heart," soothed Abla, "and concern not thyself with flight till the return of thy kinsman."

Yet was Aletra's heart ever tortured with fear of the undertaking. When the muezzin sounded the noonday prayer, Selim had not returned. Abla grew anxious, fearful. Aletra was silent.

The hours came and went, but Selim came not. The women prayed. The sun crept in from the west through the high, flower-fringed casement; still Selim came not. They crept cautiously about the Salamlik, peering through hidden casements.

Twice they heard knockings upon the door, and when those who had beat upon the door sought the houses on either side, and were told that the plague lay heavy upon the house of Al Hassen, they tarried not, but fled speedily.

When all was quiet, Abla crept to the casement and saw a great figure astride a white stallion. Beside him as he fared away ran one of the seraglio slaves. Abla trembled, but Aletra grew calm with the nearness of danger upon them.

Fearing that Babek had left some guard below, they dared not speak lest they be heard; but crouched in breathless silence beneath the casements, ever hoping for the sound of Selim's footsteps. But the sun left the narrow street and Selim came not. The shadow crept slowly upward along the walls of the mosque, but he came not.

The sun glinted at last only as a spark of white flame upon the topmost tiles of the minaret, yet he came not. The street was wrapped in shadows and the mosque was gray when the evening prayer sounded, and they prayed Allah for protection against the unknown—the terrible unknown—and again listened and waited. And still he came not.

There was no moon—a bank of clouds loomed high toward the east and hid the early stars—the mosque grew dim and faded in the darkness, and still they were alone.

As the nightfall call to prayer sounded, they prostrated themselves, and when the solemn *"Allah hu Ak Bar! Allah hu Ak Bar!"* had ceased Aletra called softly into the darkness: "Allah, Allah, Allah, thou who art merciful and compassionate, hide the wife of the master! Let the darkness that we fear be our safety, and the waiting our deliverance!" Then they watched again in the silence.

Toward midnight the moon rose and touched the rounded dome of the mosque. Aletra, extending her arms, prayed silently for the safety of the master, as

ever she did when the light of the moon first fell upon the sacred dome.

Abla, grown weary with suspense and fear, slept. Aletra kept her vigil alone.

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE WAKE OF THE LAZARINES

It was well past midnight when Aletra and Abla, who were still crouching beneath the casement, heard a faint sound in the lower court of the Salamlik, as of some one moving cautiously. Abla crept softly to the doorway and, looking into the darkness, saw a white figure moving stealthily.

She feared to stir or cry out, but even as she thought of how best to hide her mistress, the figure crept into the band of moonlight that fell through an upper casement, and she saw that it was Selim.

Twice he had come back, he told them, but feared to pass the Sultan's slaves that waited below. Finally he made a pretense of being stricken of the plague himself, and asked them to help him to the shelter of the court. This they did, having a kindly heart; but they fled the moment Selim had entered, so that the house was no longer watched.

"And the ship's papers?" asked Abla.

"Allah be praised, I have them," said the boy; and he gave two pieces of parchment into the hands of Aletra. "And now we must need hasten, for the way is clear. Take with thee what thou wilt and make ready."

Aletra wound what silks and garments she could

about her, gifts from the Sultan. Selim would not stop for sup or morsel, but hurried the two women into the street and on the way to the harbor. And when the dawn had come, they were hidden not far from the ship.

"Well were it to delay going upon the ship till the full time of sailing," said Aletra; for a great fear was upon her.

When it was near to the time for the ship's departure, a desert man passed, leading a camel which bore an empty *bassourah*. Selim spoke to him, saying that the women were worn with a long journey and asking that he take them the short distance to the ship in the *bassourah*. The man agreed, and took them to the harbor. And when the sun had risen, they stood upon the deck.

Selim had come quite close to them on land, before they took ship, and Abla had dropped a red rose from the folds of her *haik*—that was all. Selim saw and waited, that he might lift it and put it to his lips. But Aletra, having seen, put forth her hand and touched Abla in reproof as if the girl had spoken.

"Whose the eye, O my heart, that will look for a rose to blossom at the hem of my *haik?*" said the girl close to her ear. And for the reason that hers was a heart not given to fear she sought to cheer her mistress by further words of courage.

"Doth not the ship sail within the hour?" she comforted.

"Hast ever seen the great figure yonder?" asked Aletra, not heeding the girl's words. Abla looked through the opening in her veil and shrank with fright

behind one of the other women that stood near. Drawing Aletra toward her, she whispered:

"It is even Haraven, an eunuch of the Sultan, than whom none but Babek is greater. Would to Allah I had not dropped the rose."

Even as Abla spoke the eunuch lifted his hand, and two lesser slaves sprang to his side. For the space of a moment they stood before him, listening to his words. The little maid trembled, and the hand with which Aletra sought to strengthen her was as if the snows had touched it.

Then, even as their eyes were upon the great eunuch, he turned and left the ship. The slaves, being of lesser stature, were lost among the throng of the departing and the kinsmen of the departing. There was much commotion and many people were speaking in different tongues. Some fled from the plague, swearing they feared it not, others because they feared their merchandise would cheapen in remaining near the sickness. Many spoke in great excitement.

Abla drew Aletra into a place of security, and together they crouched upon some rugs and woven stuffs and listened and took courage as none spoke of them or of any search of the seraglio slaves.

Chiefly they spoke of a Syrian girl who had perished of the plague in the harbor the day before, and blasphemed that her body had not yet been removed. The lepers, who alone will touch those stricken of the plague, had not yet come for her. Abla trembled in the shadows as she listened, for she had the added fear of the plague. Aletra shuddered in her compassion for the stranger who lay upon the sands.

The moments passed. Those who went not with the ship sought the shore. There was much shouting of *salaams* and *bismillahs*. A motion of life ran through the ship—a movement such as stirs the horse of an Arab ere the rider giveth the word to depart.

The two girls were well hidden when, half crouching like Kabyle dogs in the wilderness, the two slaves of the Sultan burst through the throng and, seeing the crouching figures in the shadow, tore the veils from the faces of Aletra and Abla, crying:

"In the name of the Sultan, are these the two women who fare forth as the daughters of Nazrullah, the rug merchant?"

He who was of small stature and the older spoke. As he pronounced the name of the Sultan, all voices were hushed, and when he cried his question a second time the master of the ship looked upon the two women and commanded them to show the paper setting forth their name and country.

Aletra obeyed, and the slaves laid hold upon them and bore them to the edge of the ship amid the clamor of the throng.

"Two ladies from the royal harem!" passed from lip to lip.

"Two of the Sultan's wives escaped!"

Men spoke without concealment as the two were borne along. One standing close to Aletra said:

"No wall that hath yet been made is strong enough to preserve the virtue of a woman."

"The redder the lips the greater the conceit they cover," said another.

And at the very edge of the ship one, a Roumi, a stranger, said: "What punishment will they receive, these fleeing wives?"

And as the slave grasped her garments roughly she heard a Moslem answer: "Death."

His voice was compassionate, and he shook his head.

"They are both flowers of paradise," said an Arab, looking upon their unveiled faces. "The little one a cassia bud, the other one a flower of the snows. She need not fear being stricken unto death by the royal disfavor. But once in a lifetime doth a man gaze upon such beauty. White as the face of the angel of grief is she, yet trembling not nor weeping."

Then, coming closer, he said, almost at Aletra's ear:

"An thou tellest the commander of the faithful thou hast fled for that he hath not loved thee enough, thou wilt be forgiven; and if thou art, remember the Arab, David al Kebar."

And in the moment they stood waiting for the ship to make fast again, that they might be put ashore, she turned her great eyes full upon the Arab who had spoken, and he sprang aside as if she smote him between the eyes; for in the look she cast upon him was a desolation that spoke with a greater surety than her lips could have spoken, seeming to say: "Peace; I crave not life. I am greater than life, greater than death."

Abla screamed as the larger slave grasped her arm with brutal strength and hurried her on. He also tore the veil from her weeping face, for she had sought to cover it again and hide her distress. When they had reached the shore, and while the ship's people leaned from the decks and looked upon them and spoke concerning their beauty openly, as if they were women of the dancers, Aletra asked the older slave softly:

"What punishment dost think will be meted out to him who unveils the faces of the Sultan's chosen ones to the men of the street?"

"I had not thought—I but did it for safety," answered the slave, drawing the veil over her face himself. "I meant not to cause thee shame." He trembled as he spoke. Then, as she did not speak again, he asked, still trembling:

"An I serve thee from hence on with all gentleness, wilt thou, O lady, remember this against me?"

"And my slave girl?" she asked, touching Abla.

"And the girl also," he answered humbly.

"Then will I not remember," she said kindly, and with her own hand she drew the veil over the child's tortured face. Then, being anxious to glean what she might from the affrighted slave, she questioned him concerning Babek's plans, and he made answer:

"Babek knoweth naught of this. He believeth thou didst perish of the plague. It is the craft of Haraven hath found thee. He is second and craveth the honor of being first eunuch of the harem, which station Babek now holdeth.

"This hath he told even unto me and my brother who guardeth thy girl, and he hath promised us much gold. I have not closed mine eyes since thou didst leave the seraglio; ever was I near thee, for none others would he trust than my brother and me, who are born of the same mother."

"And if thou hadst failed?" asked Aletra.

"Then was Babek or the Sultan to know naught of this. And further, O lady, I will tell thee—an thou holdest thy silence concerning thy desire to flee ne'er will it reach the ear of the Sultan. Haraven hath told me to give thee this word. He will tell the Sultan that he found thee visiting a kinsman's harem and waiting for his summons to return to the seraglio."

"How great will be thy reward?" asked Aletra, thinking of the sapphire hidden in her bosom, yet fearing to offer it for ransom lest he tear it from her and nevertheless deliver her to the harem. But ere he could answer, the throng amid which they moved bore back upon them in sudden fear. The slave held fast to her *haik,* but a cry arose—the dreaded cry:

"The lepers, the lepers, the Lazarines."

It flew from mouth to mouth.

"They carry those who perished of the plague!"

Those that were before them rushed against the slave that held Aletra and he had almost fallen. In that moment his hold upon the *haik* was loosened, and Abla, who had ever watched the hand that held her mistress, pressed before Aletra and into her place, so that when the slave grasped the *haik* again quickly, it was the *haik* of Abla that he held.

Then, pressing Aletra's hand on the other side, she breathed softly:

"An thou walkest in the footsteps of the lepers with those that mourn, thou mayest deliver thyself."

Many women, *haik*-wrapped and veiled, pressed against them on either side in their sudden fear of the lepers and the plague, and as Aletra drew back another quickly took her place beside Abla, and she made her way toward the side whence came the procession.

And when Aletra had come to the edge of the throng she went forth with the mourners, fearlessly walking with them, even in the footsteps of the lepers.

CHAPTER XV

THE RETURN OF ATTAR

It was dawn on the Mediterranean—timid, gray dawn, before the red silk disk of the sun had stained the hem of the sea.

Attar abu Hamed al Hassen, who had paced the deck throughout the watches of the night, now stood motionless, looking toward the south, where, wrapped in a mantle of sea-mist, lay Tunis, the mecca or the grave of his desires.

A white wool burnoose fell about his massive shoulders and partly hid his face, but did not fully conceal the golden beard and splendid brow. His eyes were trying to pierce the veil that lay between him and the mosques and minarets of the southern shore: the veil of the morning.

Even since Mahmud, the fig merchant, had met him in the new country and given him Selim's message concerning that which had befallen his harem, he had longed with all the strength of his heart for a sight of Tunis.

They were anguished days for him, those first days after he had listened to the words of Mahmud. The knowledge that Aletra was left to him brought him no solace, for Selim gave Mahmud no word of Aletra faring to the seraglio, lest it overburden his kinsman with

grief, but bade him tell that his beautiful wife had not been stricken.

As a man who has been told that his date-palms lie buried under the ashes of Ætna doth not rejoice that his far olive groves are spared, but wildly bewails his loss, even so mourned he for those that had been taken, nor praised Allah nor thought of her who had been left to him.

Sleep came not to him, and when he rose and walked into the night, repeating the prayers of the Koran for comfort, it was ever memory and not the thought of Allah that fared beside him.

Without delay he began his journey to Africa. But it was only when he had left Marseilles, and was on the Mediterranean, that he felt the full weight of his loss. The last night out he spent on deck, his heart torn with unrest. At midnight he had gone below and clad himself in the raiment of his own country. There was a vague solace in the mere touch of native garments that comforted him.

Now, as he stood in the pale, windless morning, gazing toward the south, a faint glow, like the translucent sheen of a fire-opal, tinged the waters of the east. There was a slight ripple of wind that, for a moment, made the glassy surface dapple, softly pink, like a magic tesselation of mother of pearl. Another moment, as the wind blew straight toward the ship, the pink of the rippling water deepened to rose—to red—to crimson—to flame—to gold: the sun had risen.

As the first slant spears of burnished light fell upon the deck, Attar prostrated himself. It was the hour of the prayer of dawn.

When he had prayed, he turned once more to the

south and again his eyes sought for a glimpse of the outlines of Tunisia.

He did not break his fast; but hours later, as the harbor came dimly into view, a new strength filled him as if he had eaten of fine meats and sweetened bread.

When at last the ship came into the bay, he was consumed with impatience.

As it neared the landing, the midday prayer sounded from the countless soaring minarets of the city, and in that moment, while he listened, the thongs that fettered his soul fell from him and left him free to spend his sorrow, and, hiding his face, he wept. Thus his grief was eased, as the flowing of blood eases a wound and prepares it for the marvel of healing.

After landing, Attar made his way with all speed toward the bazaar. As there was a change in his homecoming, so was there a change in Tunis. The life and color that were wont to flood the streets of the city were missing. The throngs of Roumis that at other times brought wealth to the *souks* were missing also, and those who went abroad seemed to be keeping pace with the invisible sorrow that walked beside them.

The plague had spent itself, but desolation followed in its wake, and put its stamp upon the faces of those that were spared.

As he made his way along the narrow arched street beneath the overhanging roofs, he came upon many who gave him greeting. But after the first words of welcome each in turn shook his head, lifted his hands, or besought the compassion of Allah; for all Tunis was like unto a man who had had a grave sickness and whose strength has not yet returned.

Owing to the ethics of the Orient, no one condoled with him on the death of his wives, for the faintest interest concerning another man's wives shows great lack of breeding. Probably few knew of his loss. Gossip had been greatly restricted during the plague, on account of the closing of the baths, and if any man knew he would never dream of broaching the subject, for the greatest tribute to a virtuous woman of the East is to say: "No man but her husband hath looked upon her since womanhood in life or in death, or spoken of her."

When he came to the great mosque, though in anxiety to reach the bazaar, he stopped long enough to repeat the *bismillah.* But he had no room in his consciousness for the beauty of the interior, the Moorish tiles, the beautiful *mimbar,* with its fretwork of marble lace, the wonderful glass and tiles, the rare marbles with their hint of captured sunshine. No detail of the sacred place assailed his consciousness; but the merging of all the colors, the form, the fabrics, fell upon the man's anxious unrest like a deep chord of harmony, and every moment, whether he stepped upon the soft matting or pressed his forehead to the ground in humility, he gained in power and that strange spiritual pride peculiar to the sons of Islam. The mysterious grandeur that distinguishes the true believer invests the meanest beggar of the East with the bearing of a raja. For the discomfort, trials, sorrow, or whatever may harrow the kingdom of the hour, is completely dwarfed by the contemplation of the ages that have been theirs in the past, and the ages that they will inherit in the future in the heart of Allah.

As he left the mosque, he came upon an old kinsman,

the Sheik Alewa Saoud, who, when his amazement was mastered, fell upon his breast and embraced him, crying:

"Of a truth Allah hath sent thee. Much hath happened in Tunis since thou hast gone hence, and I have craved word with thee."

"Yea, O my father, the hand of fate hath fallen heavy upon my house, and its affliction hath brought me hither."

At this the sheik embraced him again and spoke with the tenderness of a woman, saying:

"I sorrow with thee as if it were mine own sorrow, for hast thou not lost a son? And art thou not my kinsman?"

When Attar heard this, he grasped the other's garments and cried out in his agony:

"Hamed; tell me not that Hamed also hath perished?"

"Nay, not Hamed, but an infant. Hamed is in safety far from Tunis, in the Village of the Weavers, whither he journeyed with thy kinsman Yoseph."

"Allah be praised," said the younger man. "Yet is mine affliction deep."

The sheik being of his father's house and a man of wisdom, he told him concerning the loss of his wives. Had the old man not been such he would not have spoken of the women of his harem, but he said naught of Aletra.

When he had finished, the sheik laid his hand upon his shoulder and said:

"Thou hast none to give thee welcome in thine own house. Fare with me unto mine, for my flesh yearneth toward thee as to a son."

But Attar told him of Aletra, who had left the

stricken house, and who was in safety in the harem of his partner, Nazrullah.

"Nazrullah!" said the old man. "Nazrullah hath gone unto his date oasis, he and his household."

"Wherefore hath he gone? Was his house also stricken?" asked Attar.

"Yea, he hath lost two children." This meant boys, for they only are called children.

He also told him that Nazrullah himself was stricken almost unto death and was carried away on the backs of his slaves.

"A-a-aa," said Attar, "who, then, holdeth the bazaar?"

"When first his house was stricken, he sent for me, knowing that I had no fear of the plague, and I have done as I would with mine own holdings. But in his haste he hath not given me directions concerning thine abode in the new country, and though I have searched the strongbox, I could find none, for Nazrullah bade me write and give thee tidings that thou shouldst blame him not for leaving Tunis."

"Hath he left word concerning Aletra with thee? Hath he perchance taken her hence with his women?"

"Naught hath he said concerning thy household save of Selim, thy young kinsman. The boy, he said, would journey into the desert to meet the caravan that brought him merchandise, that it come not into the city of the plague and be held for months." Then, seeing the trouble in the other's face, he added:

"But the plague is over, O my son. It may be that a welcome doth await thee in thine own house; that thy beautiful woman hath returned thereto, and even now tendeth the flowers in the casements."

"She should not have left the others," said Attar, and hearing the harshness of his tone the sheik said:

"Be not so swift to censure, O my son! Knowest thou this of a truth that she hath forsaken the others?"

Then Attar gave him Selim's letter, which set forth the names of those who had perished and much concerning his merchandise, and the words:

Aletra hath gone from thine house when the first one was stricken, and when she returneth I will send her to the harem of Nazrullah to await thee. Jeppa hath bidden me tell none of Aletra's departure, but to give thee word that she was in safety and to blame her not.

When he had finished reading, he sought to cheer the younger man, saying:

"I will go with thee to thy house. Perchance thy beautiful woman awaiteth thee there, having returned when the plague was over."

Attar did not answer, and they walked on in silence. But when they were come before his house, and he saw that the flowers still bloomed in the deep casements, that they were bright against the white of the wall, a sudden, fierce, swift, unbidden, almost unwelcome joy tore at his heart, for he thought of the words of the sheik.

And, even as his kinsman knocked upon the door, he looked upward toward the window and called softly, "Aletra, Aletra!" thinking that perhaps she would come to the window and look through the veil of flowers and behold him.

When no one came, the old man knocked again. The sound echoed faintly through the stone corridor beyond, but no pattering footsteps hastened, no willing hands unbarred. Then a great fear fell upon the heart of the

master, and his hand trembled as he gave Saoud the key, which he carried ever with him. His kinsman unlocked the door. As it swung back, the chill air struck him with a sense of the abandoned desolation of the place.

Solemnly, slowly, as if in a mosque or in the presence of the dead, they entered. In the salamlik, the court garden, the little court, the harem, everywhere, the quiet was unbroken.

He left the sheik in the salamlik and passed through the *bab-el-harem* (door of the harem) alone, calling softly, but only the echo of his own voice came back to him for answer. He went first to Jeppa's room. Here was a strange kind of disorder, unusual in anything belonging to Jeppa. In Zulaykha's room were a small tub of water and some of Hafiz's little garments, and many other things here and there and medicines in boxes and bottles.

Aletra's room was in perfect order but for a white veil that lay half on the floor and half on the bed. The bed itself was covered wtih pieces of unfinished embroidery in different stages of completion. There was an altar-cloth that Aletra had wrought; it was nearly finished, and a gauzy silver veil that Jeppa had written of when she began to embroider it.

The silence in this room, this paradise, which his mind had ever pictured as the Mecca of his love, tortured him, and, fearing to lose his reason in its perfumed desolation, he fled back into the court.

But when he found that none was there, he returned to the Salamlik, and when the sheik beheld him, his face was as the face of one stricken. Saoud sought to comfort him with words and embraces, but for answer the

other asked that he consider him not ungrateful, but that he craved an hour alone with his dead. His kinsman was loath to leave him, and spoke again of Aletra:

"Thy heart is sick, O my son; yet such is the manner of man when he heareth that his date-palms are buried beneath the ashes of Ætna that he doth not rejoice because his far olive-groves are spared. Yet in time he seeketh the shade of the olive-grove and delighteth in its fruit."

But Attar answered not, and turned again toward the *bab-el-harem.*

"Go then, O Attar!" said the sheik. "It is well betimes to feed thy sorrow with the sweet morsels of grief that it may be surfeited the quicker. Such is the medicine of nature. And meanwhile I will go forth and question the master of the house to the right of thee and to the left and the old women, and I will send one to the baths which have but just been opened again. I will glean what I may of gossip concerning thy wife."

And Attar listened; but, shaking his head, passed again through the *bab-el-harem.* He did not enter Aletra's room again, nor Zulaykha's, but went as ever when his heart was sore, to Jeppa's part of the harem.

Ever since Mahmud, the fig merchant, had met him in the new country and given him Selim's message concerning that which had befallen his harem, he had mourned for Jeppa. In the night that followed sleep came not to him, and even when he rose and walked into the night, repeating the prayers of the Koran for comfort, it was yet memory and not the thought of Allah that fared beside him.

Of Aletra he thought not at all; it was of Jeppa he

thought. It was the child face of Jeppa before it wore the inscrutable veil of womanhood that was ever before him—the soft music of Jeppa's words that mocked his ears with fantom whispers.

As he passed Zulaykha's door, he upbraided himself that he did not think enough of her—Zulaykha—with her docile eyes, her plump neck, her full lips. She had loved him and borne him a son, yet it was of Jeppa—"Jeppa, the perfect one," as he called her in secret—that he thought.

Now, as he entered her room, she came before his vision as she had looked when his mother brought her home, a frightened child, scarce more mature than was Zema when he left the East. He thought of her small stature, not reaching near his shoulder; of her soft flesh, as he had shyly taken her in his arms when they had been left alone for a moment, before his mother had taken her away to put her to bed with the other children; for the little wedding had been more in the nature of an adoption of a daughter-in-law into the family than a real marriage—the mother thinking that she could not begin too soon to train a wife for her son.

He thought of her frightened look, of her gratitude when she knew he was pleased with her. He remembered their first years together. How, when his mother admonished her, she would fly to him for comfort, and, nestling in his arms, would relieve her little heart with the words:

"Thou never reproachest me, it mattereth not how great the cause;" and of how he would reassure her, delighting in the softness of her touch as she clung to him or passed her little hands lovingly over his face.

Once—how well he remembered it!—about a year after his mother had surprised him with her as a "wife," she had had a particularly trying day with her embroidery, and the mother had been severe.

The memory of that day was as clear to him as if it had been yesterday. He had just returned from meeting the caravan of his kinsman Yoseph, and had not seen Jeppa for three days. When they were alone she ran to him, like the child she was, and passed her little fingers over his hands, upon his arms and his face and his neck, her touch like the tender petals of white jasmines.

"The day," she said, "hath many hours when thou art gone, and the stitches go not where I place the needle, and thy excellent mother hath cause to wax wroth with me many times. And, though I lock mine eyes close, the tears fall upon the silken mesh I 'broider, and I ask Allah to give me greater cunning with my work. But when thou art come"—here she paused and smiled, expressive of the great change—"the silk flieth through the eye of the needle, the needle flieth along the mesh, and the flower bloometh upon it as if the angels had wrought it and not I."

As she spoke, he held her close, closer than he had ever dared crush the soft little body before, and she had sighed with the delight of a child. She had lifted her little hands and felt his forehead, his cheeks, his lips, over again.

"I should see thee, even if I were blind," she cooed, "by thy flesh—it feeleth so strong." As she spoke, her breath touched his face—a strange, delightful, disturbing sense of pleasure came over him.

"And why should not my flesh seem strong, am I not a man?" he asked, and she had said:

"Nay, thou art not," in an affrighted whisper, and he had answered, holding her closer still: "Of a certainty I am, and thou, soft, little white flower of paradise, art—a woman." And he held her from him and looked upon the miracle his man-grown fancy had found within the hour.

Slowly he had bent his head to meet her waiting lips. It was as if children had carelessly lifted a precious chalice, filled with the wine of ages, and, without knowing its meaning or worth, drained it as they would a cup of milk.

Yet that moment of white innocence and the memory of her childish lips were with him, like a purifying flame. And he could not realize that all this clinging softness and gentleness were gone; that his flower of yesterday had shed its milk-white petals; that never again would its perfume mingle with his breath.

Then followed remorse—remorse for his welcome of Zulaykha. True, Jeppa was glad when she came, for had she not said so? And then there was Aletra! He reproached himself for that last night in the harem, when with Jeppa beside him, he had thought and dreamed hours away with the vision of Aletra ever before him.

Did she know it? Jeppa, the faithful—Jeppa, the perfect? Yea—yea, she knew it! Or why in the morning had she sped him forth to find the other? He groaned in spirit, condemned alike by his conscience and the prophet; his soul sickened with self-reproach. If sorrow shrives the soul, the purgatory of those nights had left him sinless.

When the hour was fulfilled, and he heard the sheik at the door, he left the harem; but as he passed Aletra's door on the way, he felt a quick resentment toward her

for that she had deserted Jeppa. But when he had opened and beheld the sheik's face, a sudden fear seized him that Aletra, too, had perished.

His kinsman did not speak nor look into his eyes; but set food before him, a dish of *cous-cous,* brought to the door by a woman who knew there was naught in the house of food; also a jug of mare's milk. Al Hassen would not sup, but questioned him concerning his tidings; and when the other would not speak he burst forth in a torrent of words:

"Thou canst hold thy peace an thou wilt, O my father; but I see in thine eyes that Allah hath taken even her." The old man still kept silent. Then, bethinking that in time the other would hear the gossip of the wells, even as he had heard it, he broke the silence, saying:

"Nay, O my son, thy beautiful wife perished not!"

"What meanest thou, then?" cried Attar as he read his kinsman's face, and he grasped him with such strength that the other cried out: "Peace, peace, I will tell thee!"

And he told of what was spoken at the great well—that one of his wives had fared forth upon a camel with silken trappings, and that he would see her no more. But the words had not left the old man's mouth before Attar cried out in his wrath:

"Lies! Lies! Black as the slime of the wells at which they were made," and his face was terrible to behold, for suddenly the blood rushed once more along his veins till his flesh burned with the fires they had kindled.

The man of age and wisdom sought not to stay his wrath for a time; but when he saw that it grew in place

of lessening, he counseled him to wait without blaming or believing.

"Let us move wisely, as if ordered by reason," he said. "There are letters at the bazaar. These have I sent for; they should be here presently. In them mayst thou find word that will comfort thy heart. Selim, thy nephew, hath gone out of Tunis ere I came. Nazrullah bade me open all letters till he should send for them, or return. This have I done. But those that bore thy name have I not opened."

"Hast thou had word from Nazrullah?" asked the master.

"Yea, from the caravans."

Though no letter had been received, word had come that he was safe in one of the small oases. In mid-desert one caravan passing or meeting another will pause, and in the space of an hour, with all the unhurried grace of a friendly conversation, the most momentous messages will be sent by a stranger to a stranger.

Such messages will pass from one caravan to another until they reach their destination in their original construction, and their inviolate transmission constitutes a part of the desert code of honor.

In such manner came word from Nazrullah, and was received as unquestionably the truth.

"And from Selim?"

"Nay, but Nazrullah hath told me the boy would go forth to meet the caravan with merchandise. Ramon, the wizard, who hath brought fresh serpents but yesterday, spoke with him well out of Tunis; therefore is he safe. Thou art prospered in one thing, I doubt not, for a demand hath come more than a moon past that

thou send rugs and silken stuffs for the consideration of the harem ladies at the seraglio, and a letter bearing the royal seal hath come soon thereafter. Oft was I tempted to break it, but it bore thy name and I would not.

"Hast thou searched well for any word that could have been left for thine eye alone? Hast thou looked even among the garments of thy women for such a script?"

"Nay," said Attar, "my grief hath overwhelmed me."

"Then, O my son, go thou unto thy harem and search, and if thou wilt I will go to thine own room. It may be that we shall find some message." Attar bowed his head and led the way.

"Thou mayst follow even here," he said at the *bab-el-harem*. "Naught is there but desolation within."

They spent nearly an hour searching everywhere in Jeppa's and Zulaykha's part of the harem, but without results. Finding nothing, Attar went again to Aletra's room and lifted the embroideries, one by one, reverently, as sacred relics left by vanished hands.

As he moved about and bent over, he saw a small paper, half hidden by the massive footboard of the Tunisian bed. It was Jeppa's letter to Aletra, sealed as she had left it, for Aletra had never found it after she returned from the seraglio. He read:

Peace be unto thee, O Aletra! May Allah give thee the great blessing. I wait not that I may tell thee with my lips of all that hath befallen us since thou hast fared forth, for there is that within me that bids me write—that bids me speak to thee to-night, and quickly—for I know that only in paradise shall I see thee again, and I want thee to know the fullness of a mother's love and gratitude.

By thy going in my place was I with little Zema even to the end of her frail life. Tell thou unto the master when he come—Zulaykha calleth. I will finish when I have ministered unto her.

There was nothing more beyond the interruption. Her writing, usually so delicately perfect, was tremulous, and as Attar read, tears dropped upon the uneven scroll. When he had finished he put it to his lips for a long moment.

"Thine, O Jeppa, hath ever been the hand to comfort me—to ease my sorrow; ever hath wisdom sat upon thy childish brow; ever hast thou spoken the word of peace and sought to fulfill the wishes of my heart, and it is still thy little hand that showeth the way—that uncovereth that which was a mystery."

Holding the mute missive in his hand, he could almost see the calm face of Jeppa, he could almost hear her low voice saying: "It was Aletra who fared to the seraglio—Aletra, and not thy Jeppa. Aletra it was that hath been seen faring forth on the camel with silken trappings; but she hath gone by my wish, not her own, and the plague was at the seraglio. It was not delight that tempted her."

All this he thought in the short moment before he sought the sheik.

"This explaineth much," said his kinsman after reading, "and also have I seen that in thine own part of the house which maketh it seem that one other than thou hath lain there—a woman."

"Nay, sayest thou?" cried Attar in amazement, and he passed quickly within. To him also it was plain that the room had been occupied—and by a woman.

The perfume of wistaria, sweetly vagrant, spoke of Aletra.

His own white *gondoura* had the scent mingled with its *tambac* and amber, and there were long hairs—as long as his arm—upon the white surface. The *gondoura* had been used by Aletra! When he realized this, he took it up and covered it with a passion of kisses.

There was also a shawl in the room, a shawl of great beauty, worth the price of a camel—dull blue, with copper workings, as minute as weaving. This he held aloft, and they gazed upon it in wonder, for naught had ever come into his house of such worth.

"She hath returned!" he cried in his joy.

"Yea," said the old man, then added: "Yet is she not here."

But even as he spoke there was the sound of some one without, and he left Attar and went to the door and took the letters from the messenger who had been sent for them to the bazaar, and he carried them to the master. When Attar saw that there were many he said to his kinsman:

"Open thou, also, and read; for I have no secrets from thee."

The old man lifted the letter which bore the royal seal, but the seal did not show, for he had placed it downward on his way, doubting not since he had read Jeppa's script that this letter bore evil tidings to his kinsman.

But when he had opened the letter and read the first words, he cried out in amaze:

"By Allah, this is for thine eye alone. No longer needest thou doubt where bideth thy beautiful woman."

Attar almost tore the paper from his hand, and together they read the Sultan's scroll:

ATTAR ABU HAMED AL HASSEN:

In the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate, greeting!

I have been instructed by the representative of Allah, the Sultan, who hath been entrusted with the leading of Islam, and whose judgment and will are unquestioned, to give unto thee the good tidings that thy wife Jeppa hath found favor in his eyes.

"Jeppa! Jeppa!" cried Attar in amazement, but the other was consumed with wonder, and held his eyes upon the paper.

"Read," he said with impatience, and they continued to scan the page together.

Oft hath our royal master honored some brave man with a gift of bright-eyes from the garden of his own harem; but never before hath he sought to honor any son of Islam by taking a flower that hath shed its first perfume for another man's delight.

Art thou, Attar abu Hamed al Hassen, overwhelmed with this, the greatest honor that hath befallen thy house? And art thou not stricken dumb with amazement that he who holdeth Islam in the hollow of his hand should consider the holy right of one of his subjects, and ask for that which he hath the power to take?

Added to this honor he doth thee, by taking a wife from thy harem, he will furthermore recompense thee with three bales of silken stuffs, three prayer-rugs from Mecca—one of which hath taken a whole family ten good years to weave, and upon which three Marabouts hath turned their faces toward the kaaba.

Also he giveth thee three horses—whose heels spurn the highway, scarce touching it—with embroidered saddles and trappings, and three burden-bearing camels, and three white camels of great speed with silk-draped bassourahs, and in two of these wilt thou find a jasmine flower from the gardens of the inner harem: one with hair of gold and eyes like the sky, the other with the darkness of the tempest in her hair.

Either hath a rich beauty of flesh and smoothness and bloom upon the skin, for have they not eaten of the perfumed sweets of the seraglio of over a year?

In two of the silken bassourahs shalt thou find these wonderful living gifts, and the third shall be empty, that thou canst withdraw when thou are wearied with visiting in the others, and meditate upon the kindness of thy royal master's heart.

"But," thou askest, "whither go I on a desert journey?" and I answer, thou hast not yet heard all, for it is the pleasure of the Incomparable One, the Sultan, that thou be set in power over one of the desert cities, that thy name may go down the road of generations as a great man, honored above all others by the leader of the faithful.

Well favored slaves, also, shall fare forth with thee, and thy wishes shall be supplied before they are known to thine own heart. Furthermore, thou shalt have a ring, a seal of lote blossoms, and whatever favor thou cravest, in reason, for the good of thy house, shall thou be given as long as thou livest.

And what wilt thou do to show thy gratitude for such princely favors? Thou wilt write in the space below, ten words, and the words shall be: Jeppa, I divorce thee, I divorce thee, I divorce thee! and thou shalt sign thy name. As thou writest, speak, also, the same words aloud. Was ever so kingly a price given for ten little words?

Yet, O Attar abu Hamed al Hassen, would I give thee counsel to use all haste in despatching them by a swift and sure messenger, as soon as the ink drieth, lest the wind blow out of another part of the heavens and turn the royal mind to other pleasures.

Such, O my brother, are the wishes of the Sultan.

May Allah keep thee humble in thy prosperity.

HAFIZ ABOUL AL HARROUN,
Royal Scribe.

"She hath gone in Jeppa's place, taking the name of Jeppa," said the sheik abruptly when they had finished reading.

Then, as Attar did not speak, but began rereading certain portions of the letter while his brows were drawn and his lips set, the old man added:

"Of a truth those words were written in a royal hour. He offereth thee much."

There was almost a question in the last words, but Attar heard them not, and, throwing the script from him and flinging his burnoose aside, he said in a strangled voice as if he were alone, as if he had quite forgotten the sheik:

"By Allah——" Then again: "By Allah——"

There was no more. The words were like a cry in the extremity of being. But whether it was fear or grief or hate his kinsman could not know. His face was white; his eyes, deep blue in his pleasure, were now black and wore that veiled look peculiar to Orientals when they wish to conceal the quality of their emotions.

Among the peoples of the East a man may call his enemy the son of a dog, a thief, a murderer, curse his flesh, wish him to be eaten by jackals, or to have naught but sand with which to quench his thirst, and they may again be friends; but when he is silent, when his face shows neither rage nor hate, when his eyes are veiled beyond the reading of any emotion, he is to be feared to the death.

Therefore, noting his silence, and seeing the curtained look before his eyes, the sheik said no word for a time while Attar stood like a statue looking into space with his unseeing and unrevealing eyes. At length Saoud repeated, with the same rising inflection that had the quality of a question: "He hath offered thee much?"

Then, as if he had not spoken, the master asked:

"Wilt thou, O my father, bear my answer to the seraglio?"

"Yea, of a certainty; but have a care, and remember—she is but a woman."

Again, as if the other had not spoken, Attar said:

"I will not hold thee overlong."

Drawing forth paper, he lifted a pen, wrote but a few words then folded the sheet, and would have sealed it but that his kinsman stayed his hand, saying:

"Thou art young, O my son, and thy blood is the blood of youth. What hast thou written to thy Sultan?"

Attar opened the letter and read:

"Greetings unto thee, O mighty Sultan:

"Thy letter concerning my wife hath come to me, and here I set forth my answer: Thou art too poor to buy her. Therefore let thy slaves put her before the great gates where I will wait that I may bear her to my house, for she is my wife.

"ATTAR ABU HAMED AL HASSEN."

"Thou art the son of my brother," said the old man slowly, shaking his head when he had listened. "Thy words do thy heart honor—yet I am sore troubled concerning that which will happen when they meet the Sultan's eye. Do you know what he will do?" the old man asked fearfully.

"No."

"Listen!"

Attar tried to speak, but the sheik stopped him.

"Peace," he said; "age bringeth wisdom. Let us move with reason, and consider well. That," he continued, pointing to the Sultan's letter which lay upon the rug, "hath been sent more than a moon past. It

was written when the plague lay heavy upon Tunis—when even the royal heart held fear.

"Therefore, thinking of the wrath of Allah, he that may take what he will hath asked of thee even as a common man, offering thee a price. But thinkest thou he hath waited thy answer through the days and the nights that have followed this writing?"

"Peace, peace," cried the master, "I can sustain no more."

"It is for that reason I would advise thee, for what would be the worth of thy life an I carry thy words to the seraglio? An thou hast any hope of seeing thy Nourmahal once more within thy harem, thou must needs use craft against power and wisdom against desire. Furthermore, there are other messages here awaiting thine eye. Perchance there is one from Aletra."

At these words Attar quickly grasped the other letters, which he had forgotten, and sought eagerly among them for a stroke of Aletra's pen. And when he found none, he took up a sealed letter in Selim's script that bore on the outside his name and the words:

Enclose this in the letter of the Sheik Nazrullah to my kinsman, Attar abu Hamed al Hassen.

And he opened and read:

If thou hearest not from Aletra, question the Imaum, in whom she will confide if she be still in Tunis. She is not with Nazrullah, but make thy questions with all secrecy. More I fear to write lest I get thee into trouble, but later will I send thee fuller word. Thou canst take the comfort to thy heart that she hath not been stricken.

Having read eagerly, he turned quickly toward his kinsman.

"I will go to the Imaum at once," he said. "Selim biddeth me question him concerning Aletra. Read thou the script."

As the other read, he turned to go; but before he reached the door the voice of his kinsman stopped him.

"None but Allah may question the Imaum," he said, "for he, also, hath perished."

With a motion of despair the other turned from the door and continued to search among the letters for anything that he might find concerning Aletra.

When the last script had been scanned, and there was naught further of moment, Attar asked:

"Upon what road hath Selim journeyed?"

"That know I not," returned his kinsman; "but an thou seest Ramon, he will tell thee. Also, if she hath returned—and how else came such a shawl into thy harem?—she may be in hiding nearby."

"Yea," said Attar, and his heart gave a great bound, then fell as he thought that, finding none left on her return, she might have been taken back to the royal harem.

"Yea," he repeated, "an she hath left the seraglio, I will find her though every sand of the desert feel my footsteps; though I search under the leaves of every garden in Tunis."

"It is well," said Saoud, "and now let us leave this abode of sorrow which sickeneth thy mind. Let us make fast the door and seek Ramon ere I take the message to the Sultan. I would also counsel that thou layest bare thy heart before Ramon. It is not for naught that he is

called the 'Wizard of the Desert.'" And Attar bowed his head.

When they had secured the door, they fared forth, Attar to seek the wizard and Saoud to learn what he could of the seraglio slaves. For, notwithstanding what he had said, he believed Aletra was still in the seraglio. When they met toward nightfall, Attar, who had not yet found Ramon, was impatient to continue the search; but as the hour was late, and as the sheik counseled waiting till the morrow, when they would go forth together, he saw the wisdom of his words, and went with him to his house where they passed the night.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TRAIL OF THE DANCING WOMAN

At sunrise they began the search again, but all they could learn was that Ramon was expected at the place of auction at noon; so Attar returned to his house to make a further search, and it was near noon when he fared forth to meet the sheik at the fritter-shop of Ben Ali.

As Attar passed the court of the Mosque of Sadi Ben Zaid on his way to meet his kinsman, one of the doves that circle ceaselessly about the minaret fell disabled upon the stones at his feet. It was not mortally hurt, for it struggled with fluttering, widespread wings about the street.

He made several efforts to catch it, but ever it eluded him with short, low flights, barely skimming the ground. He could have captured almost any of the numberless gray doves that were unhurt, but this wounded white one continued to elude him.

After a space, as its pinions grew weak, he stepped forward—for there was yet time before Saoud would reach the fritter-shop, where they were to meet. He was in a fever of anxiety to see the wizard and hear the words he might be able to give him of Selim.

As it was not yet noon, and he had to wait, and as waiting is one of the virtues of the East, he watched the

dove. Its wings soon dropped and spread in the dust; slower and slower become its movements, shorter and shorter its earth-skimming flights, till at last it rested a moment on the stones, spent but still fluttering.

Another, also, had been watching it—a man. He now came from the other side of the narrow street, and lifting the dove in his hands began to examine it for the hurt. This was soon found, for one tiny, stemlike leg hung disabled. Attar drew near him.

"Give me the kindness of a match," said the man, who was a Hindu. And while Attar felt for his case, the other resumed, now speaking to the dove:

"A little string—and a twig—and a little time—and again shalt thou circle the minarets."

The bird lay content in his hand, twisting its head from side to side to look into his face in childlike questioning. Even when the little leg was straightened and bound against the twig it made no struggle.

Attar watched the kind deftness of the Hindu's hand. But now, as he looked upon the face bent above the dove, he felt that he must be in the presence of some holy man—so full of loving, compassionate tenderness it was.

"Thou are skilled?" said Attar when the other had finished and the dove had settled in security.

"But little," answered the Hindu in Arabic. "Yet many years among the tribes of the air have made me think for them."

A rare, beautiful kindliness shone from his eyes. As he spoke, he balanced the dove upon his wrist.

It was a special auction day; many caravans had come fresh from the desert, and there was much talk of a herd of young *mehari* (racing camels) being

brought from a far oasis. As the crowd began to thicken, the stranger with the dove was being jostled. He carried a small basket in one hand and the wounded dove in the other.

"Canst thou not rest the dove in the basket?" asked Attar. The stranger smiled and answered:

"Nay; it is best thus—for the dove." So Attar's commanding height and bulk forced a way for the Hindu, the dove still perched serenely upon his arm.

When they had reached an opening, he thanked the Moslem with gentle courtesy and a grave humility. But, even as he showed his appreciation, there was also an expression of stifled amusement. Attar did not catch this; for, having suddenly become aware of the lapse of time, he was in haste to reach the fritter-shop.

He might have lingered longer, however; for, though the sheik was awaiting him, it was some time before the boy set to watch for the Wizard brought them word that he was come.

When they reached the court, they found the crowd so dense they could not make their way through it. But the boy, dodging beneath elbows and between legs of tall Arabs, soon stood beside the snake charmer—the "Wizard of the Desert," as the Hindu mystic was called.

Saoud had bidden him ask for a moment before the performance began. But there are perhaps other boys who would have forgotten the message in the wonder of beholding a great *nag*—the monstrous cobra of the desert—used as a plaything; while men who would have sprung in the air with fright if confronted by the reptile in any other way circled closely about, within easy striking distance of its deadly fangs.

When Attar and his kinsman had bribed and pushed their way through the crowd of desert men—Berbers, Bedouins, Arabs, Nomads—into the inner circle, the great reptile, brown as the sands of the desert from whose leagues it came, had begun to raise its head.

From the coiled mass upon the silken rug the head rose, moving from side to side, as the Wizard swayed his body in unison with the air that floated crystal clear from the flute which he held lightly.

"Is that Ramon?" asked Attar; for when he beheld the charmer of snakes he saw with amazement that he was none other than the man who had lifted the dove in the court of the mosque.

The cobra appeared to be fascinated with the melody, and kept time by moving its graceful head from side to side. From right to left, from left to right, it moved with the slow, swaying motion of a pendulum. Each time the head of the *nag* was raised insensibly higher; the monster was uncoiling.

It was perhaps six feet in length; but where a few moments before the head had been raised two feet, it was now as high as the heads of the smaller boys about the circle.

Even as they looked, it passed this mark. Back and forth, back and forth, to and fro—it followed the sure, unhurried, measured motion of the figure before it—it was now as high as the waists of the men, yet no one sought to retreat; nor would it have been possible, with the dense mass of humanity packed closely about.

The coils on the rug were scarcely diminished in apparent length, but were growing slimmer. The head was now as high as the breast of the Wizard, and had

changed in shape. It was growing larger, swelling about the neck.

The sun shone full upon its back, tipping each minute brown enameled scale with gold as it moved to and fro in the shadowless space. Its armor of gleaming topaz ran the gamut of golden notes with each sinuous motion.

It was even with the man's face—to and fro, to and fro, it swayed with the music. It was now as high as his eyes—his forehead—the top of his head. For an instant it seemed to tower above him. As a reflex from the prolonged tenseness, there was a slight movement in the crowd, and in that time a child who was being held aloft put out its hand as if to caress the reptile.

The eyes of the man who held him were so intent upon the cobra that he did not notice the movement of the little hand till, with incredible swiftness, the serpent's head darted past him toward it.

But even as the cobra made its sudden plunge at the child's arm, which was the only motionless object within its vision, Ramon with wonderful agility put forth his hand and, brushing the child's arm away almost roughly, pursued a series of slow motions that ever tended downward till with every wavelike movement the serpent's height began to diminish. The circle of men gazed with fascinated eyes when at last the hand of the Wizard went down—down—down—and with it the great, swelling, beautiful head of the monster.

Later, as the cobra lay coiled in the sunlight, the man who held the child came closer to the Wizard and spoke in a low tone that only he might hear, saying:

"Much have I heard of the wisdom of Ramon the Wizard; but to-day have I seen the workings of his compassion. For well I know," he continued, "that

thou hast taken thy life in thine hand to save a child, and any favor whatsoever thou cravest at the hands of Hassin al Marmud is thine.

"By the gracious favor of the sublime Sultan I am in the seraglio, and when thy feet crave to press the royal rugs of the Salamlik thou shalt but breathe my name and the gates will open."

And the Wizard replied lightly:

"Consider not thy danger to have been so grave. Few are the moments of the day when we walk not upon the turf of our own graves; but if the scant earth hold us up in the sunshine as we pass over, why turn back and measure the depth of the turf that sustained us? Go thy way, and waste not thy gratitude upon a charmer of serpents."

Having spoken these words he turned away; and when the sheik saw that he was finished, he brought Attar before him, and as they sought the fritter-shop they asked him of Selim.

"I held no word with him," returned the Hindu; "but David, the camel-driver, hath bound a lotion on the foot of his beast, which had gone lame, and they conversed more than an hour."

"And where bideth David?" asked Attar.

"He hath gone to Khairwan, but he returneth by Friday. The greater haste will be to await him here," he added, seeing Attar's impatience.

When they were seated upon the rugs Aneese, the waiter, came and, bending from his lordly height, placed a cup of coffee at the foot of each.

The deep green of the tiles, the soft, subdued tints of the fixtures, the odor of the fritters and coffee, the slow motions of the Arabs that served, all produced a

comforting effect. The day was warm for December, and the coolness of the arched shop was restful.

"Ramon knoweth the heart of man," said the sheik, in Arabic, after they had sipped their coffee, "and thou wilt find help if thou givest him word of thy perplexity."

Attar nodded, and together they told the Wizard of the complications surrounding the disappearance of Aletra. There was a look of thoughtful intelligence upon the Hindu's face as the story unfolded, showing that he took a deep interest; but at mention of the Sultan's offer he shook his head.

"It is well-nigh impossible to penetrate into the secrets of the seraglio, as thou knowest," he said.

The others could not but concur, yet there was a look of determination, as well as acute suffering, upon Attar's face. The determination came, perhaps, from his Russian mother, or his long residence in the Occident; but Ramon noticed only the look of misery, and his heart went out to him with the same compassion he had felt for the dove—for he, too, had known suffering.

He regarded him much as he had the wounded dove; but binding a man's heart was a greater task when the string must come from the Sultan's seraglio.

He knit his brows and thought deeply in the silence that followed. Presently his face cleared and he spoke the one word: "Idillah."

"The dancer?" asked the old sheik.

"She hath once been a woman of the royal harem. Capricious, cold, unscrupulous," he answered slowly.

"And Ramon understandeth women," said the sheik.

Ramon shook his head.

"Say that I understand Sanscrit or the serpents, or

that I can read the secrets of the stars—anything which is within the possible; but women—ah, they are different! Yet will I go hence and learn if this woman be still in the Street of the Dancers. For thou knowest such are here to-day and there to-morrow, having no sure abiding place."

With this he left them, and they took their way to the bazaar to find if any message or script had come from Selim or Nazrullah.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE DANCING WOMAN'S CHAMBER.

THAT night Idillah danced the dance of the Iris as never before. The three men sat together well to the front. Attar drew his burnoose so that but little of his face could be seen. His mood was not for entertainment; yet he wanted to read the lineaments of the woman who alone could help him through her knowledge of the slaves of the royal household.

The girl seemed to know that she was before a new and critical presence. Attar aroused her interest by his carriage, the shimmer of his silken garments, and by the golden beard, which was not concealed. All these fanned her imagination, though she could not see his face.

As the moments passed and he became interested, he did not notice that the Hindu, by moving adroitly, had managed to draw the hood of his mantle back, a little at a time, so that Idillah, seeing him, should single him out and mark him with her favor, that the meeting might be easier.

He had little faith in Attar's tact, and was, in truth, afraid that his coldness and directness in questioning might not only lose them her assistance, but be the means of warning the royal harem.

The life of the dancing girl had not yet written its story upon her face. She was fair—of mixed desert and Berber blood—with hair that was almost tawny in the sunlight and darkly splendid in the shadow, and had the wondering eyes of a child.

The dance of the Iris was as voluptuous as the perfume of the flower from which it took its name. There was something strangely harmonious between it and the music of the half-smothered tom-toms—little tom-toms, struck in a broken measure lightly, until somehow they suggested an echo in their murmurous tones.

The dance had motive, as do all the dances of the East; but in the different poses and circles, while she was graceful and wonderfully mobile, the impression upon the beholder was like looking upon a picture without perspective. The symbolic, tragic intensity that underlies all genius, when associated with color or motion or sound, was entirely lacking; yet she was the whole picture, and men went wild in their enthusiasm.

They showered coins and flowers and trinkets upon her, and she danced upon the coins and flowers and trinkets, nor lifted one in her henna-tinted fingers.

The old sheik unfastened a small jewel with his bony fingers and threw it to her. Ramon threw her a handful of coins and looked at her with his great soft, brown eyes. He had a fashion of looking at women in such a way as to make the coin he threw seem but as an inconsequent accompaniment.

Idillah recognized the flattery of the look and smiled; but Attar, the golden-bearded giant, continued to look upon her without seeing her. With the instinct of a pretty woman she resented this, and determined to make him see. The trick of bending her head upon his knee,

or falling, a quivering heap, at his feet, which many of the dancers use was beneath her.

She circled and swirled and beamed about him, but always, as if she feared his detaining hand, she darted away like a bird. Again and again she came so close that he felt her breath, but so swift were her movements that he could not have touched her if he had sought to do so. Once he moved his hand for more coin. She was quite close, when, laughing into his eyes, she swam away in the cloud of incense and *tambak* smoke and vanished.

The three men rose immediately and went out to await her exit. She was already in the doorway. A slave had picked the flowers and trinkets and coins from the floor and given them into her hands; but as the men came into view, she lifted the spoil and laughingly threw it among the beggars that crowded the doorway. It was said that she did this every night.

Ramon and the sheik urged Attar forward; but he was loath to go, and prevailed upon the Hindu to get speech with her, while he and the other waited in the shadow. In a few minutes Ramon returned with a scrap of paper in his hand.

"An hour before midnight," he said, "go thou to this place. Idillah will await thee."

"Thou hast told her why I would have speech with her?" asked Attar.

Ramon was silent.

"Thinkest thou she hath been willing?" resumed Attar.

"Thou hast seen me with her but the space of a moment. How should I tell her of thy story?" returned the Hindu impatiently, and he would have left the

others, but he feared that Attar might anger Idillah by delaying; so he waited, and when the hour had come, led the Moslem with many cautions and much advice to the foot of Idillah's little stairway.

When Attar had mounted the stair by the light of the small candle at the top, he was undecided as to the best way of dealing with the girl. The Wizard's suggestion that he tell her that he was seeking a jewel that he prized would have been good in the hands of Ramon.

"But I am not Ramon," he thought, "and every man hath a way by which he attaineth his desire, and that way is the easiest to him. None may graft the vine upon the fig-tree, nor the fig upon the date-palm." Yet he was admitted to Idillah before he had formed any plan better than the Hindu's.

The sudden glare of the brilliantly lighted room, with its blotches of color, half bewildered him.

Idillah had been one of the favorite wives at the seraglio, but so intolerant was she of the royal favor straying for a moment that she kept the harem in continual unrest. So, one day when the master himself tired of her caprices, he bestowed her as a mark of honor upon a petty ruler who had done him a service.

The new owner was mercenary, and valued the beautiful silken dower of his new wife fully as much as he did the wife herself. But before many moons he was glad to divorce her, and even to add to the dower that she had brought with her, to be free from her imperious exactions of courtesy and attentions.

His four other wives, docile as they were, having scarcely drawn a peaceful breath if the master so much

as looked upon them, felt almost translated to paradise when she gathered her silken dower and took her departure.

It was a part of this dower that met the gaze of Attar as he entered. There was no method or arrangement, of color or period. The effect was barbaric, crude, elemental in its confusion, yet nothing else would have expressed the woman who stood in the midst of it half so well. The light came from many wrought lamps, but one was higher than the rest. Under this stood Idillah.

She had cast aside the dancing-robe, and wore a Persian scarf of shadowy silk wrapped about her perfect body, after the fashion of Eastern girls in the desert. The folds of the silk shimmered and gleamed almost white on the high lights of her shapely limbs. She held a red rose in her dazzling teeth, and smiled as she noticed his confusion.

When he did not speak, she came toward him.

"Salaama," she said, and made an obesiance fit for greeting the Sultan.

"Peace be with thee, Idillah," he answered simply. "Ramon gaveth me word that I could talk with thee."

Idillah nodded, and led him to a small divan in another part of the rich, crowded room, and with dainty grace loosened the fastenings of his silken burnoose.

She knew that he was speaking of having word with her; but as the hood of the concealing mantle dropped away, the majestic beauty—the grandeur of the man—made her heedless of his words, and the hero-worship of a child shone from her eyes as she threw herself upon the floor at his feet to listen.

"Thou wert in the royal harem?" he asked, looking upon the perfection of her grace pityingly.

"Yea," she answered; "but many are there who have shared the favor of the Sultan that thou wouldst not turn thy head to gaze upon."

"Thou comprehendest not," he answered.

"Thou art right, O noble sheik! Idillah knoweth not what grace Allah hath given her to win thy favor."

Then, for she was vain of the perfect poses of her dancing, she added:

"Did the dance of the Iris please thee?"—laughing at her own conceit—"that thou wouldst break it from its stem and wear it?"

When he answered not she repeated: "Did my dancing please thee?"

"Yea," said Attar. "It was good."

"Good, good!" exclaimed the girl, in amaze at the coldness of his tone. Then musingly: "It was not my dancing?" and she smiled. "Hath my face found favor in thine eyes? Am I beautiful? I am hungry for a word from thee, for wherever thou goest shouldst have the fairest."

"Knowest thou not that thou art fair?" he asked chidingly.

"Many have so spoken," she said, "and I have held their words no closer than doth the wind of the desert a mote of fleece. But word of thine would I treasure as a deep-hued jewel of gladness."

"Then, Idillah," he answered, with a faint smile, "thou art fair," and she waited eagerly for more praise. "Thou hast a goodly form, a bright eye, and much hair of a rich color, and thy teeth are sound, showing that thou are both young and healthy."

As he spoke, her face changed. The pleased, dewy smile of gratification was followed by a questioning look

—a look of non-comprehension; then her color rose slowly in anger.

"And comest thou hither in the silence of the night to tell me that my eyes are good, and that I am, forsooth, young and healthy?"

She had risen, and stood before him in growing fury.

"An thou hadst not asked me," he said, "I would have said naught of thy beauty, which to thee must be common enough; for hast thou not seen it daily?"

"Speak not of *me,* of my *beauty,* of my *dancing,* or of anything that concerneth me. None of these are aught to thee, or ever shall be!" she shrilled in her anger.

"Thou art right," he agreed. "They concern me not. Rather would I that thou wert old and ill-favored, so wouldst thou have a soft heart."

"A soft heart? What manner of man art thou, Attar abu Hamed al Hassen?"

But he was wearied, and so filled with anxiety that he became angry in his turn at her desire for compliment.

"Ramon, the Wizard, hath told me that thou couldst help me in my search. Art thou willing to favor me with the knowledge thou hast, or dost thou refuse?"

"Ramon, the Wizard, said naught of any quest," said Idillah.

"Wallahi!" exclaimed Attar. "I crave thy forgiveness with my forehead in the dust, and thank thee for the favor thou hast shown a sorrowing son of Islam!"

His sudden contrition and homage soothed her vanity, the more that it graced a man so nobly made.

"Speak," she said, after a pause, as she stood with clasped hands and with eyes upon the floor—"speak,

and that which lieth within the power of Idillah is thine, even now before thou asketh."

"Thy words are words of comfort to my heart," he answered. "I will tell thee. I seek one who was in the royal harem."

"Bideth she there now?" asked Idillah.

"I know not; but much dependeth upon that knowledge. Canst thou help me to that knowledge?"

"'Tis long since I was in the harem," she answered, averting her eyes.

"Canst thou not think of some slave?"

"Nay, I changed my slaves often."

"Or one who hath, perchance, brought sweets or broideries?"

"Nay."

"Thou seest no way?" he asked, gathering his burnoose from the divan.

"Nay. It were a grave deed to pry into the mysteries of the seraglio, and life itself may be the forfeit, O Attar, and thou art too goodly a man to perish for a woman."

"I will find another way," he said, rising. "I thank thee for the favor of listening to my sorrows."

"Is it a slave thou seekest? Would she be among the slaves?" she asked, to detain him.

"Nay, the Nourmahal would she be."

"What sayest thou? Wait. Could I but go into the seraglio as a veiled woman——" She interrupted herself with a laugh.

"Yet am I merry that I have outgrown the veil; that I am no longer the slave of any man, but free, free to talk to whom I will, as now in the depths of the night."

"But thy honor?" questioned Attar. He spoke sorrowfully.

"Honor! sayest thou? I have now the honor of a man, a Moslem, a Christian, a Hindu—have I not had speech with all?"

As he continued to look reproachfully upon her, she moved uneasily and asked, half defiantly:

"Is there any virtue greater than that of a true son of Islam? Even so is mine. I steal not, nor defraud, nor bear false witness, nor defile the mosques with cries of Wallahi. I kill not, nor spread sedition, nor consort with unbelievers.

"Mine is the honor of a man—behold me!" she said, raising her right arm in a heroic attitude. "No more defiled than the godliest, godlier than the most defiled. This honor, the honor of a man, I pledge thee in keeping the secret of thy undertaking. Here is my hand."

"Since it is thy will to be measured after the manner of men, I touch not thy hand."

"Thy reason?"

"Man rendereth to the utmost for his pleasure. Women like thee not only waste the lives that God hath given them, but spend the souls and fortunes of men for the beam of a jewel or the deep dye of raiment or the power of a moment."

"Man rendereth unto the utmost farthing, thou sayest?" she asked, with blazing eyes.

"Thou hast spoken of the honor of man. Such is a part of that honor."

"Fool, fool that thou art," she cried, "with thy great stature, and thy beauty and wisdom, and thine eyes' searching sight! Canst thou not see that the price thy honor knoweth is mean, bare, all worthless beside that

which we give. Thinkest thou that the gifts of gold or jewels or fair raiment preserve the honor of the giver? Then how much greater the honor of one like unto me, who giveth her pride, her body, her soul, her children's reverence; who bringeth her father to shame and her mother into infamy!"

She burst into frantic weeping.

"O women of Islam! When will the unbelievers teach the Moslem? When will the Moslem mother nurse her children in the safe knowledge of the unchanging love of the master? They see it not, but babble of Kismet—the Imaums, and Mollahs—while the Christians walk step by step into the fertile places of Africa. Can they not see that the Christians are born in truth by women that believe the love of the master is for them alone?

"O, my holy friend," she continued, shaking her head, "the bravest man in Islam is half coward, for he is the offspring of a woman who ever has been afraid. Give unto the women of Islam security, and they will breed power!"

She looked past Attar into the distance, and her features were set as in prophecy.

"Idillah," he said gravely, laying his hand upon her head, "thou hast a strife with Allah, not men; for unto both men and women hath he given his commands, and well thou knowest a man's station in paradise dependst upon the number of his wives and children. Thou art not like unto the others. Get thee away, and take the veil for some good man."

"Nay, why take the veil? Men veil not their faces that they may not be seen of women."

Attar turned away impatiently. "Quarrel with Allah an thou wilt. I made not the laws nor the veils."

"Nay, but thou holdest thyself above touching the tips of my fingers, for that mine honor is the same as thine own. I dance for the love of the quick motion, and the smiling faces, the lights, the music, and the love in the eyes of every man. I seek it as those who hunger seek food."

"Hast thou found it not?" asked Attar.

"Nay, I think I have found it, but 'tis a mirage, ever a mirage—a scorching wilderness where I would gather flowers."

"An thou shouldst find it in the arms of a wanderer in the desert?" he asked.

"Then would I cast aside all other thoughts for him, and in the place where he had planted his foot, there would I put mine also until we reached the utmost height."

"For him wouldst thou take the veil?" asked Attar.

"Nay, nor need would there be for the veil of wool or of silk, for the veil of disdain for all others would hide my smiles."

Turning, she waved her hand about the room.

"There are good men in Islam," he interrupted.

"Have I not seen them?" she answered scornfully, "at the palace of dancers, with their sons beside them? Have I not seen their fingers linger as they place a coin upon the forehead of some favorite—a woman they hold as the dust beneath their feet, for hath she not sinned greatly in not having wisdom for herself and them also?"

"Yet the wives of Moslems are happy, living in peace with the masters—men like unto the ones thou hast seen."

"Happy, sayest thou?" she answered. "What knowest thou, a man, of the heart of a woman?" Then slowly:

"I tell thee they are not happy, an they love."

"Thou thinkest?" he asked sadly.

"Nay, the wise only are the ones who think—learned men of reason like thee—women but know."

Again she pointed to the things about her as when he interrupted her before.

"These adornments of my abode are the gifts of the Sultan and my sheik husband. My short life with the last as his wife is all that shameth me, O righteous one; yet art thou so much better than I? Again the honor of man I offer thee in thy undertaking. Wilt thou take it?"

This time he said:

"I take thy hand, yet not as holding the honor of a man, but that of a woman, which is greater. Idillah, thou hast a beautiful soul, and I honor thee."

The hand he took was cold, but her eyes looked fearlessly into his.

"When thou seekest me again, thou will not find me in the Street of the Dancers," she said. Then, with a sudden change, she whirled about; the seeress gone, she was once more a thing of lightness; yet her lips trembled, and her eyes were floating in a mist as she attempted a trivial smile.

A glass of water stood upon a tabouret at her side. She drank it eagerly, then with quick, sure motions she opened the Koran and took from its leaves some pieces of paper. Attar, who was standing with his burnoose wrapped around him in readiness to depart, watched her in silence as she prepared to write.

"Tarry," she said; "I will put the words upon this

paper that will take thee into the seraglio. Yet much caution must I command, being in scant favor, and my hand lendeth itself but poorly to the forming of script; so rest thy weariness upon the couch while I put down such words as shall give thee greatest opportunity."

As he hesitated, she added: "It will be well after the call of the gaffirs when I make ready to seal, so make thyself content."

Attar was weary, and the softness of the couch with its perfumed rugs and robes was grateful. Before beginning to write, Idillah took from the corner a great pipe, filled with Turkish *tambak* mixture and, without touching his hand, gave it to him. He watched her poise her pen, consider, and write.

There was a faint sound of music, for they were still dancing not far away. With the pipe came a feeling of drowsy comfort. Soon the figure of Idillah, with her knitted brow and flying fingers, became less distinct, vague, shadowy, and presently the pipe fell from his lips upon the heavy bokarra, and he slept.

Having sealed the letter, she rose, turned quickly, and brought it to Attar.

"Here is the letter that will bring thee into the heart of the seraglio, where I go not now, and thy wisdom must do for thee what remaineth to be done," she said.

When there was no answer, she called him sharply, and would have put her icy hand upon his face and sought to rouse him by stronger means, but something stayed her.

In the profoundness of his sleep much of the dignity that was a part of his bearing was gone. The lines of suffering also that were recently carved upon his features had disappeared, and that look of helplessness

peculiar to men of great stature when off guard was upon him.

Despite the golden beard and the great frame, there was a boyishness in the wide, smooth brow, the unembittered lips, that touched the protecting maternal instinct of the woman as she looked down upon him; and, despairing of awakening him without clamor, she lifted a rug and laid it gently upon him, as if he were in truth a child.

The night had grown chilly, for the great furnace of sunlit sand in the distance had cooled for many hours.

Twice she put forth her hand to waken him, and twice she withdrew it.

As she looked upon the abandon of the great body in extreme weariness, the dawning of a new sense of womanhood stirred her heart. This man, who slept quietly within sight of her perfect self, was the first that ever had gazed upon her tenderly, but without desire.

As she looked, he sighed deeply, as one whose boat of dreams sailed in the leaden waters of despair. Hearing this, a great compassion filled her, and in place of awakening him, with touch light as the breath of dawn, she covered him with other silken rugs and embroidered stuffs; but never did her hand touch his or her lips satisfy their craving.

"Thou shalt sleep till first the morning breaks," she whispered softly. "And thy slave Idillah will keep watch at thy feet."

Having laden the sleeping figure with the warmest of the rugs, she extinguished the lights, one by one, until only a tiny gleam showed through the mimic crescent of Damascus brasswork.

She shivered as she gathered the folds of a white wool *haik* about her and made ready to rest.

Before the couch on which Attar lay, and which was the only bed in the room, was a great rug from Mecca. On this she sought rest; but as she drew the other rugs upon her, she saw that, waking, the man could not but behold her. Very softly she rose and, using all her fine strength, drew the Mecca rug across the foot of the *angerib*—beyond hazard of his waking gaze.

The room was very still; even the music in the distance had ceased, and only the occasional stealthy opening of a door and the shuffling of slippered feet sounded in the night.

Attar slept the insensate sleep of profound oblivion. Idillah slept not; but, drawing the embroidered burnoose over her head, sobbed forth her heart in the call that is ages old:

"Allah, Allah, Allah! Thou who art merciful and compassionate, absolve thou me from mine iniquity. Allah, Allah, Allah!"

CHAPTER XVIII

ATTAR'S HOUR OF DECISION

WHEN Attar came down the little stairway in the dawn, he went straightway to the house of the sheik and told him of the help Idillah had given, and showed him her letter to Babek. But his kinsman frowned, for he was not well pleased that Attar should enter the seraglio, and he sought to reason with him.

"My son," he said, pressing his hand upon the other's breast, "thou are consuming thyself and thy goods for a woman. Such is not the command of Allah. What is a woman? Doth not the Koran say: 'A man's wives are his lands?' Doth not a man love his land for the fruits of the land?

"The jasmine flower that perfumeth the shade, the date that refresheth his strength, the juice of the grape that quencheth his thirst, are the fruits of the land, and therefore he holdeth the land precious; but the Sultan offereth thee two wives for this woman, and, furthermore, giveth thee such substance as shall permit thee to raise up a household of great magnitude."

Attar kept silence. The sheik looked irritated.

"Thou wouldst commit a sin," he said.

"What wouldst thou have me do?" asked Attar, lifting his hands.

"What doth a man do when his house hath fallen

about him? He buildeth again with fresh mortar and new bricks, and whiteneth it over, and sitteth in the shade of the new vine, and liveth according to the commands of Allah.

"Thou shouldst straightway take to thyself such wives as thou canst, and when thy children rise about thee in thy age, wilt thou look forward to paradise, where thou shalt have a place among the true believers. The Sultan hath thy wife; take what he giveth thee; established thy household," advised the sheik earnestly.

This gave Attar no comfort, and he made ready to depart.

"Then take thou the letter," said the sheik after a pause, seeing that the other's heart was set, "lay it before the commander of the faithful, and ask what it meaneth. Say no word more, but wait and listen, and cast thine eyes about thee; and if he say thy wife hath ceased to be thy wife, take what he hath promised thee, for what is written is written.

"If he say he hath her not, ask thou where she hath fared. No other word shalt thou say, for silence is ever a hard questioner, and the heart will answer to its commands when the spoken word will seal the lips."

"Thinkest thou I will hear the truth?"

"An thou gettest speech with the Sultan—yea."

Then Attar, refusing to partake of food, drew his burnoose about him.

"Allah speed thy project and bless thee with a great household," said the old man.

"Peace be ever with thee," returned Attar, and he left him and took his way toward the palace of the Sultan.

On presenting Idillah's letter, Attar was conducted

without difficulty to Babek. Having read the letter the chief eunuch of the harem frowned and said:

"The royal master is much concerned with affairs of state, and hath little time to give thought to the harem."

Attar produced the letter that had been sent to him by the Sultan's command, and, showing the seal, asked that he be brought into the presence of the commander of the faithful without delay. Babek, whose duty it was to know the royal temper as the physician knows the patient's pulse, hesitated and asked:

"Idillah, how fareth she?"

"Sound and well favored is Idillah," returned Attar.

"Bideth she yet in the Street of the Dancers?" he questioned again—for it was a grievous thing in his mind that Idillah had been sent from the seraglio—and a still more grievous thing that she had gone to the Street of the Dancers.

"No more will she abide there," answered the other.

Babek was well pleased with the words, and interpreted them in but one way. He questioned no further, and left him, saying:

"An the Sultan will see thee, I will bring thee word forthwith."

It was an hour after the midday call to prayer when he returned and motioned Attar to follow.

"I will take thee to the inner doors," said Babek as they went toward the great room where sat the Sultan. "And thou shalt bide thy time to enter—for there be many with him. Also would I counsel that thy message be brief and thy speech soft—for much hath disturbed the royal mind and it is speedy to anger."

Attar made no answer, and the slave spoke again:

"Certain Franks bearing messages of import from their own country be with him even now——"

"Franks, sayest thou?" questioned Attar, for at the time there was an unnamed trouble seething in Islam against the Franks.

"Yea, and the air which bloweth from the inner court smelleth of much controversy," answered the enunch.

As they waited beyond the last door, Attar found that it was as Babek had said. Those who passed out wore the garments of mystery. No word spoke any, yet about the calmest Moor or Arab or Berber that issued from the shadow beyond was the odor of war.

Suddenly the curtains were held wide and two men issued therefrom—both Roumis.

"The Franks!" passed in subdued speech from lip to lip. One of the men was smaller than the least among those that waited, and the faces of both were dark with anger. The brow of the older Frank was crimson, and though the air was chill, he sweated great drops, so wroth was he with the happenings within. As he drew his kerchief forth, it fell upon the tiled floor near the feet of Attar.

The Moslem did not stoop to lift it; but another—also a man of princely figure—clad in costly silk and wearing a head-covering of distinction, sprang to restore the piece of linen. For all his princely trappings, the Moor bent low as he proffered the kerchief and smiled as if to gain favor.

But the Frank took it without giving thanks, and went on his way muttering a curse upon Islam with scant care that it should not be heard. Attar followed.

"I heard thee but faintly," he said, standing in the path of the Frank, "and perchance my ear hath deceived me—perchance thou hast but cursed thine own im-

patience; yet had thy words a different seeming—a seeming of dangerous import," he added, and his eyes grew dark, "if spoken within the ear of a true believer."

The Frank, a man of valor who feared not the numbers of Islam, so clothed was he with the dignity of his country or he had not carried such word to the Sultan as he had brought, was about to repeat the oath when he paused with the words upon his lips. There was that in the blue-black eyes of the Moslem which made him, for a moment, doubt the easy conquest of Tunisia and the Moors; still Attar waited with unwavering calmness that had in it more of demand than any show of power.

The Frank's wrath died. Anger is but a lash for slaves; he was himself a brave man, and he read the fearlessness of the Moslem before him.

"Thou art right, O sheik," he said with a greater courtesy than he had shown the Sultan.

Still Attar waited.

"Thou art a loyal subject," spoke the Frank again, "and now suffer me to go my way."

"First, O noble stranger, would I hear thy words again, that mine ear may be sure of their meaning; for I would crave thy pardon for having suspected aught of blasphemy from thy honorable lips."

The Frank laughed joylessly; then, replacing the kerchief in his garments, said quickly, as if he liked not the taste of the words:

"I but cursed mine own impatience, O sheik."

"It is well," returned Attar; "I crave thy pardon with my forehead in the dust;" and he stepped aside that the Frank might pass.

Within, a brave-seeming court stood about the Sultan, strong, long-limbed Moslems, bravely clad in colors of

pride and courage, in silks and brocades and embroideries, and wearing jewels that bespoke much substance.

The Sultan wore a brooding look, as if he saw that beyond the shadows which caused him grave displeasure nigh unto fear. Those near the divan whereon he reclined spoke soft words, praising his wisdom and princely courage. But he answered them not.

They numbered over the strength of Tunisia and Maroc and the desert cities that called him Sultan, and strove with jest and honeyed words to banish his concern.

"Waste not thy quick youth in brooding; naught but sorcery may overcome thee;" and: "What is written is written," they counseled in differing words, but he answered them not.

"The Roumis have disturbed the serenity of thy noble mind, O most gracious Commander of the Faithful," said one who had his ear. "Let there be music—give word that the dancing girls be brought forth to charm thy gray moments. Babek—thou Babek!" he called, as he saw the great eunuch leaning near the door.

The moment the eunuch had waited for was come, and he approached those about the Sultan, and spoke into the ear of a sheik who was older than the rest. From lip to lip the word passed:

"Attar abu Hamed al Hassen," said the Sultan slowly, when the word had been repeated to him. "Whence cometh he? The name is not unknown to mine ear, yet do I not recall where it hath fitted into the royal pattern."

"He is the Moslem to whom thou didst offer princely holdings for the Prophetess Jeppa," said Haroun, the

scribe who had written to Attar. "Wilt thou have speech with him?"

"Nay," said the Sultan, suddenly remembering, "give unto him whatever he asketh of the things thou hast set forth in the letter and send him hence—for the sound of his name bringeth a great sadness upon me."

And the scribe went to Attar and told him of the words of the commander of the faithful. But the scribe returned right speedily, bringing words that the Moslem accepted not the gifts for that he would not have given his wife.

When the Sultan heard this, he was wroth, and had Attar brought close and questioned him, as if disbelieving the words of the scribe.

"Attar al Hassen," he cried, "answer an thou valuest thy life and the favor of thy Sultan: An thy wife had lived, wouldst thou not have made her a gift to the royal harem?"

And Al Hassen made answer:

"She was my wife—unto no man would I have given her."

Amazement alone restrained the Sultan's words. Attar's eyes gazed into his without a tremor.

"Thou didst ask for the truth, O Mighty Sultan! I would not have given her unto thee."

For the space of a moment the royal glance had well-nigh withered him where he stood.

"First am I defied of the Franks," cried the Sultan in hot wrath, "and within the hour doth a Moslem question my favor. An the woman were living thy madness were explained—perchance forgiven. But seeing thou hast naught to gain, why troublest thou me?"

Attar would have spoken, but the other would not

suffer him. He was in a dark mood. His anger had grown for days, and those that waited about scarce breathed till he should pronounce punishment upon the man who had set the torch of ill-chosen words to the fuel that lay ready for the flame.

Attar alone gazed calm and unafraid into the eyes of the Sultan. This but fanned the ruler's anger, though he still sought to preserve a princely mien.

"Thou shalt go forth, Attar abu Hamed al Hassen," he said after a pause; "thou shalt go forth in poverty as thou hast chosen. But come not back. Tunisia hath but scant need for such as thee."

Then, his anger rising beyond the power of his control, he cried:

"Hence! Hence! Offend mine ears no more."

And Attar, being satisfied that the commander of the faithful knew not that Aletra lived, bowed his head and went quickly from the royal presence.

Then Babek bent swiftly and spoke into the Sultan's ear, and told him of that which had happened in the outer court. The ruler could scarce believe his words; but when others vouched for them—the story having wafted into the great room—he bade a slave go quickly and bring Attar again before him—for the happening was a great draft to his pride, and he was greatly pleased that the Frank had been thus humbled even before those of Islam by a common man. When Attar was come, he questioned him.

"Why hast thou done this thing unto the Frank, O Al Hassen?"

And Attar answered simply:

"Naught else was there to do."

And again he looked calmly, without fear, yet with-

out pleasure, into the royal eyes, though the Sultan now smiled upon him.

"Thou art an honest man," cried the commander of the faithful. "Would that Islam had more like unto thee."

Then suddenly he asked: "What thinkest thou of the danger of the Frank? Thinkest thou it is but a wind that bloweth over the country?"

"That know I not, O Sultan! Yet were it safe to make the tents secure when the wind bloweth."

"Thou hast spoken. And for thy words, which chime with mine own thoughts, and for what thou hast done to an enemy of Islam, will I make thee the bearer of my answer to the Franks which has been promised within the moon.

"Thou art he for whom I have sought—an incorruptible man. Thou shalt bide in the seraglio as one invested with high office. Await my summons," he said, rising, and without waiting for an answer he turned to Babek and ordered:

"Pick from the fairest a dozen slaves to minister to the Sheik al Hassen, and conduct him to the part of the palace where were lodged the recently departed guests from Persia. Also for his pleasure bring Azalia, the Greek, and Zittarra, the Kabylian.

"Thus do I reward thee, O Attar al Hassen, for speaking the truth without fear or greed. Both of these —my wives in the royal harem that I bestow upon thee —are beautiful."

Attar strove to speak without interrupting the Sultan, but the other raised his hand for silence.

"Forget thy Jeppa, who is now in paradise, in the smiles of living lips."

And before Attar could speak, he gathered his shimmering robes about him and, moving toward the corridor, disappeared among the waiting slaves.

When he had gone, Babek led Al Hassen into the great outer court, with its fountains and carvings and tiles and rugs, the same that Aletra had entered the day she left the seraglio, but Attar saw nothing of its beauty and splendor, nor thought of the favor that had befallen him, except insofar as it increased his trouble.

"Thou hast well-nigh destroyed thyself," said Babek, "but in the moment art thou a great man. I can see that if thou art wise thou wilt be greater than any in the seraglio."

"Who hath brought thee word that she hath been stricken of the plague and perished?" asked Attar, not heeding the eunuch's words.

"So important was the mission that I trusted none, but went myself to thine house."

"And whom didst thou have speech with?"

"There were none within, but all that lived near gave unto me word that Jeppa had perished of the plague, and bade me fare to the cemetery if I believed not, and I went and found that Jeppa rested there."

Attar would not tell him of the difference in the women, lest the other renew his quest to gain the favor of his royal master; yet he wished for some small word that Aletra might have said concerning him, and asked:

"Hadst thou speech with—Jeppa?"

"Yea," answered Babek.

"Hath she given thee any word or command?"

"Yea," again the other answered.

"And that word?" urged Attar hungrily.

"When she fared forth, I was loath to have the great

gate opened till I should have some word from the master; and in her impatience she said unto me: 'An thou wouldst have a fair life when I return, open thou speedily and obey my commands.' "

"Said she so?" asked Attar in alarm, looking searchingly at Babek.

"Even so," answered the slave, and there was an air of truth about his words.

In the hour that followed, when he was alone in that part of the seraglio given over to him, he was sore troubled at the words Babek had spoken, and doubt, colder than the chill of a desert night, crept about his heart—doubt of Aletra. Then, as if a door had been opened into the outer world, he heard the voice of this world:

"Why dost thou hesitate to live the life thou hast ever lived, and that thy fathers have lived before thee? Why takest thou not the land and the camels, the gold and the silk stuffs—and the wives?"

The odor of flowers and burning incense filled the room. And, as he thought, a woman's silken scarf was cast upon the divan near him.

Lifting his gaze he saw a girl of great beauty. She was unveiled, and her eyes were red from weeping. His heart was kindly, and the sight of a woman in tears was ever a painful one to him, so he sought to comfort her, thinking she, perchance, had displeased the favorite.

"Thy mistress hath been wroth with thee?" he began, and waited for an answer.

She made no answer, and he spoke again:

"Dry thine eyes and fear not, for thou lookest a fair damsel and good."

The girl continued to regard him, but still answered not, though she seemed indignant in her bearing, and the flash of her steady, black eyes reproached him.

"Why weepest thou? Answer."

"I weep not," she said in idiomatic Arabic.

"Why hast thou wept, then? Wouldst thou aught of me?"

"Naught," she answered, still looking upon him with eyes of unwinking brilliancy.

"Who art thou?" he asked at length.

"Thy wife, Azalia," she answered in a low voice.

"Nay," he returned, "I have no such wife. Aletra is the name of my wife."

"The royal master hath but just given me to thee. Within the hour hath Babek conducted me hither. Therefore weep I that I must fare from the seraglio."

"Thou needst not, perchance," he answered, with knitted brows, for he had thought the Sultan would have called him into his presence again before he gave him all of that which he had promised. Then would he have told him that he was not of a willing heart to take unto himself more wives until he had mourned for those he had lost.

The girl still stood before him, and thinking that he had taken her explanation of her tears as a token that she liked him not, she hastened to speak, for the sight of so well-made a man went far to comfort the wild weeping that Babek had threatened to chastise her for.

"Nay," she said, "I wept that I feared that thou wouldst have been ill-favored. Now that mine eyes behold thee I am content."

He seemed not to hear her; and, thinking that he was still displeased with her words about leaving the

seraglio, she came closer, cast her gay silken scarf aside and looked into his eyes, smiling.

The smile changed her face, her eyes seeming to be a part of it. It was as if through a floating mass of smoke, a pale flame had leaped, casting a burnished glow and warming all it touched. The strange power that slumbers in the great eyes of the Oriental was intensified, concentrated in the smile.

He felt, as he looked upon her, that in some way she represented Islam, represented *woman* as the Moslem comprehends her.

All that had once been to him was wakened by her smile, which fell about him as a cloak of some bright-hued fabric. After a moment, and while he was still looking into her eyes, they wavered, rose again to meet his, then with a fluttering the heavy lids covered them. She turned away and sighed.

Unconsciously he took a step forward. Her pose, meditative in its outward seeming, was still subtly intense and alluring. An indefinite, feminine aura surrounded her. The look of her eyes, though red with weeping; the slight droop of the full, softly molded lips, the splendid head, all were parts of an untamed, primitive, magnificent being subdued by the great, dominating, major force of elemental nature.

As he did not come nearer nor speak, she raised her eyes again. They were not the eyes of *a woman,* but of *woman*—the woman of the East. In their depths he dimly read the Moslem creed, the Spirit of the Harem, the traditions of his life, and he felt that his hour of decision had come.

As he wavered, a lute girl who waited beyond the

inner curtain sent out quivering, silvery notes into the dusk. The frail strain came through the silken curtain:

"The bulbul wanders to and fro——"

The words of the song were those Aletra had sung the night before his departure. He listened intently, his arms half extended toward Azalia—listened as if he heard something from afar. She waited—the woman's look of invitation still in her eyes. But even as he gazed upon her she seemed to him farther away. She sang:

"His wind is weak, his note is low."

The eyes into which his looked were loosing their spell——

"In vain he makes his song.
Since she he wooed so long
No more sheds perfume on the air around."

As he listened the presence of *woman* faded at the distant faint call of memory—memory of *a woman.* He still looked upon Azalia, beholding her not, till the lute girl's song was stilled by the prayer of Ashr', the sunset call: *"Allah hu Ak Bar! Allah hu Ak Bar! Allah hu Ak Bar!"*

Attar prostrated himself, but even while he prayed, he thought of his tryst in the court of the mosque and reproached himself, and when the prayer had ceased, he rose, and turning, left the perfumed promises of Islam without looking further upon the woman, for he knew that his hour of decision had come and gone.

CHAPTER XIX

ON THE RIM OF THE DESERT

RAMON and the Sheik Saoud waited in the court of the mosque beside the palace for some time. It was nearing the evening-call, and Attar had said he would meet them an hour before. But as the time passed, the Wizard became impatient and rose from his half reclining position.

"I will go hence and look after my serpents," he said, and he withdrew, leaving the sheik to wait alone.

And when he reached his lodgings, he brought forth the reptiles. There were many, some small, and of bright colors, that he sometimes wound about his arm; a very young python, and the cobra that he had charmed the day before.

First he lifted the small ones and played with them as one would with a young dog, speaking the while as is the habit of those who have lived much alone with nature. The language was not Arabic nor Bengalese, but was more like the Hindu, and resembled an incantation, yet was not one. It was the tongue of his unrest, the voice of the unwalled wilderness that had become a part of him.

"The fool," he said, "to tarry in the shadow of the seraglio! He hath a great frame and the wit of a camel."

Unrest and vexation were strong upon him, but his life with the adepts in the fastnesses of the mountains had taught him that it was impossible for one to control others unless he first control himself, and he felt the need of such action as would mean concentration.

With a firm touch he opened the basket that held the *naga.*

"Come forth," he said, "and save thy master's reason, for he hath much need of it."

The serpent had not been fed recently and was restless and eager to leave the nestlike abode. As it stretched upon the floor, the Hindu attracted its attention and it prepared to strike. He evaded the thrust and waved his hand threateningly to provoke its anger. So, for many minutes, he played with danger, every thought, action, and impulse under command. It was a game of death; he staked his life again and again on his skill.

"Once more," he said to the cobra, when he had tired of his sport, "once more hast thou preserved thy master from madness."

And he placed the serpent again in security, wrapped his mantle about him and went back to the court of the mosque. Attar came within the moment.

"Hast thou found her whom thou didst seek?" asked Saoud eagerly.

"Nay. The Sultan believeth in truth that she has perished, as also doth Babek, nor would I tell them of my hope. But much trouble hath befallen me: the Sultan hath given me all the goods set forth in his letter—and also hath he given me two wives."

"This is thy sorrow?" asked Ramon, while the old sheik looked well pleased.

"Even this," answered Attar. "But let us go into a place of greater secrecy. Much hath befallen that I would tell unto thee."

As they fared from the court of the mosque, they came upon David, the young Jewish Arab whom Attar had sought the day before. Ramon questioned him:

"Dost thou, O David, remember the boy Selim from Tunis—the one who had the lame camel that thou didst try to heal in the desert?"

"Yea," answered the Jew.

"Of whose house was he?"

"Of the house of Al Hassen. Selim abu Yoseph al Hassen was he called."

"Hath he fared alone on his journey? How many numbered he in his caravan?"

"There was but a single camel," returned the man. "He but journeyed for merchandise to Biskra."

"Knowest thou this of a certainty?"

"Yea. None were with him but his two wives, and he journeyed to the Village of the Weavers, where dwell his kinsmen."

Attar sought to question him also, but the Hindu restrained him by a quick touch upon his garment. And when Ramon had questioned the Jew concerning his abode they let him go upon his way. Attar would follow.

"Calm thine impatience," cautioned the Hindu. As he spoke, he drew them into a shadowed niche that they might take counsel together.

"Thou hast not questioned where he hath seen Selim in the desert," said Attar, still looking after the boy.

"'Twas but a short way from the Tombouctu road. He was beneath my eye, yet knew I not how many were

in his caravan, for he came alone to our tents," answered Ramon.

And Attar would journey straightway upon the road to Tombouctu. Nor thought he of the displeasure of the Sultan if it be found that he was not in the seraglio. And it was with difficulty that Saoud and Ramon drew from his lips the happenings of the day.

The old sheik besought him to take the gifts the Sultan had bestowed and also the wives, and wait word from Selim; but the younger man would not heed him. The Hindu saw that security lay in distance—distance from the seraglio and the royal master, and when he had thought deeply he questioned:

"When wouldst thou begin thy journey? For thou knowest that if she be in hiding, to none other than thee will she discover herself."

"Yea," returned Attar, "I would go hence in the night that I may not be held and punished for base ingratitude."

Ramon dissented scornfully.

"Truth is there in the words that 'A great body hath scant wit.' Thinkest thou to escape the eye of the Sultan?" he asked impatiently.

"Seest thou another way?"

"Yea; let the Sultan send thee forth. Leave thou thy perplexity to me, and make ready for thy journey. I, too, fare toward the desert, by the sunrise call to prayer, and will go with thee along much of thy way."

"How dost thou think to go into the presence of the Sultan and get his will to send me hence?" asked Attar.

Ramon remembered the words of Hassen al Marmud, whose child he had saved from the venom of the serpent, but he answered simply:

"An I stay the night to tell thee, I had no time to go before the Sultan."

"Yet——"

"Yet! What meanest thou? Have not I given thee word, 'Leave the Sultan unto me?' If thou wouldst have my poor services, speak, for in truth my path lieth well the other way from thine, and I have but tarried the day to help thee. If I can serve thee not, speak also that I may go upon my way quickly."

"What dost thou counsel?" asked Attar, and his face was troubled.

For answer the other slowly removed his burnoose and seated himself.

"I will tell thee of what I should have spoken, had I fared to the seraglio this night," he said calmly.

"Dost thou not go?" asked Attar in alarm.

"Nay, O my friend," he answered, "how may I tarry to tell thee, and be before the Sultan also? An I do the one, I may not do the other," he concluded.

"Let it be even as thou sayest," said the Moslem at last.

"An thou hadst such reason when we were first come here, I had been well on my way," returned the Wizard reproachfully. "I will meet thee an hour before midnight at the house of thy kinsman."

It was past midnight when the moon had set. There were but a few hours of darkness ahead when Ramon opened the door softly and entered.

"Allah be praised," cried Attar, and clasped him in a great embrace.

"All is in readiness," said the Hindu. "There are good horses and a burden-bearing camel—the Sultan

bids thee haste with all speed to thy son, who lieth ill in the desert.

"How hast thou accomplished this?" asked Attar.

"Wilt thou that we bide here the night that I may tell thee?" Ramon made answer. "For an thou art not again in Tunis by the waning of the next moon, neither riches, nor lands, nor rug stuffs, nor camels, nor honor shall be thine. In truth, all wilt thou forfeit."

"And the wives?"

"Them also wilt thou forfeit."

"It is well," answered Attar, breathing deeply as if a great burden had been taken from him, and they went out into the night.

When they left Tunis, Attar and Ramon rode horses which were the gift of the Sultan. Ramon's two Sudanese followed with the gift-camel and those that belonged to Ramon, the beasts being laden with tents and rugs and other things needful for the journey.

The Wizard had taken the dove with him, it being helpless and trying ever to pick away the cords that held the small splints in place. Attar had counseled giving it to Idillah, but Ramon objected, saying that the dove should not be polluted by her touch. Then, thinking of the dancing girl's words, he said after a time:

"Hast ever questioned thyself if the stain that forever clings to the hand of a woman be so easily cleansed from that of a man?"

"Nay," returned Ramon, "never have I questioned the wisdom of the most great."

CHAPTER XX

ALETRA SHOWS KEEN WIT

When Aletra had followed in the footsteps of the lepers for a little way she heard a great confusion of voices. The slaves who had held her darted into the throng on either side, shouting "In the name of the Sultan!" and lifting such veils as they thought might conceal the countenance of her whom they sought.

Steadfastly she followed the unclean—feigning a halting gait which made her seem of smaller stature and older, though it is ever hard to determine the age of a haik-wrapped woman in the Orient, so completely covered is her body as well as her face.

The older slave came close, and fearing that he mistrusted her she carefully covered her hand and extended it for alms. A moment he paused in fright, then bestowed a coin upon her and hastened on his search.

When she had followed the lepers some distance and was come near to the cemeteries, a blind man besought that some one lead him, for he had none of his own house left unto him. Aletra paused and spoke to the man. He liked well the sound of her voice, and as he was hidden in the corner of a wall, she sank at his feet and began latching his shoes as might a daughter. And he had much gratitude and besought her services, saying:

"I would fare out of Tunis by nightfall an I get one to go with me. All of my house are perished, and I would return to mine own people; for I am not of this country, as thou seest, but an Egyptian, a Copt. I have such substance as shall take me on my journey and leave a small wage for one to minister to my needs."

"Desolation also encompasseth my house," said Aletra. "I alone am left. I fare with thee right willingly—an I go as thy daughter, no other way."

To this the man agreed and took her to his abode. He liked well her voice, but he asked that she lift her veil and suffer him to read the lineaments of her face with his hand, and when he had done this he was amazed at her beauty.

"Knowest thou not," he said in a troubled voice, "that safer is it by far to journey with a jewel of price than with a beautiful woman?"

Aletra feared he would not take her thence, but took courage as he spoke again.

"Yet also art thou a good woman, and a good woman is ever discreet." Then he asked: "Of whose house art thou?"

"Of the house of Najeb Hafed Harroun, who dwelleth afar, nigh unto Beirut, in Syria," she made answer, but she told him not that her father had been bred in Tunisia and that he that dwelt in Beirut was but a distant kinsman of her father's whom she had never seen.

"It is well," said the Copt. "I am of the house of Zobel Ben Zewar, and since those of nearest kin have perished here in Tunis, I return to the Land of Egypt where dwell my people, and Egypt lieth nigh unto the

country thou wouldst reach, an thou farest to thy kinsman's house."

"Of a truth am I favored of Allah," said Aletra, and she lifted the sleeve of the man's garment to her lips.

"How art thou called, my daughter?" he asked.

"How was thy youngest daughter called?" questioned Aletra.

"Hagar," he answered, "her mother was of the Jews."

"Then call thou me Hagar."

"Thou hast wisdom," he praised. "Yet hast thou such wisdom as to ever keep thy face concealed?"

"Yea, O my father," she answered, "and when e'er I unveil, e'en before women will I make myself so ill-favored that none will ask me of thee for their sons in marriage."

"Wit hast thou also," he said, and a goodly smile broke through the wrinkles of his aged face. "Wit, yea, and wisdom," he repeated, "and beauty, and something greater than these—that thou wouldst protect thy virtue."

As he spoke he laid his hand upon her head in blessing. Her heart was filled with comfort at the touch, yet would she not burden him with her secret. Later, when she went forth to buy food, he said again as he put coin in her hand:

"Be thou discreet, O my daughter, and suffer not the wind to trifle with thy veil, for a beautiful woman is more dangerous to hold than a jewel of price, and mine ear craveth the sound of thy voice on this journey. Thou seemest but a child, yet thou hast the rare wisdom of woman."

And she assured him and went forth, but ever she thought of his words and of the great sapphire that lay hidden against her breast.

As she came near to the bazaar, the seraglio slaves tore the veils from women who stood waiting. But, before any had seen her, she turned and fled back to the abode of Zobel.

She had brought with her only flour, and lacked many things; but as she came before her door an Arab boy besought her to buy five eggs which he held in the corner of his small burnoose, and she was glad, and took them. As she prepared the fritters Zobel craved, she trembled so that her hands scarce held the basins, and though in the security of the walls she harkened to every sound without.

"Allah, O Allah, preserve thou me from the eyes that watch," she besought. "Hear me, hear me, O Allah, for my heart fainteth with a great fear."

As she broke one of the eggs into the meal, the outer shell went into fragments, but the skin beneath it held for a moment like parchment. As she looked upon it, a swift memory of the lepers she had seen but on hour past smote her, and suddenly hope sprang in her heart.

With great care she took the inner lining from the shell and laid it upon her face as she had seen her mother lay it upon a hand that had been seared by the fire, and when she looked upon herself she shrank with fright, even in the moment that she rejoiced; for the white skin of the egg clung to her features even as the skin cleaveth to the face of a leper till there was no spot left uncovered.

She told Zobel naught of this, for he would be

loath to have the people cry "Unclean," and refuse to harbor them. But she took great care to draw her veil closely even when speaking to the women in the house and in the bazaar, whither she fared again to buy things needful for the journey, which they began at nightfall.

She feared for Selim and Abla, and thought to pass her own door as they left the city and leave a scroll for the boy. This she prepared—a script bidding him not to follow her and saying she was in safety, but when she was come before the door of her own abode, she saw him and Abla standing without, and beside them were the two slaves that had torn her from the ship, and she feared to tarry lest they suspect her.

Seeing Abla with Selim she had no further anxiety concerning the girl, for love, she knew, groweth even in the loam of death; but she went slowly as if her burden were heavy, that she might hear a word of that which was spoken. This was easy, for Abla cried wildly:

"Awah! Awah! have I not told these that my mistress sped swiftly to the water's edge and, without waiting, sprang into the sea!"

Aletra would have tarried; but Zobel, missing her from his side, called "Hagar, Hagar," and, fearing lest her voice betray both her and Abla, she answered not, but hurried her steps, and taking his hand led him away through the streets of the city till they came to the outer edge.

When the night had fallen, they were beyond Tunis and their faces were set toward the desert, which revealeth and concealeth many things.

CHAPTER XXI

WARNINGS OF THE PARDONER'S WRATH

"PEACE be unto thee."

Ramon, sitting beside a palm of the oasis, raised his eyes to the Arab who spoke. The man had ridden a swift camel and now came toward him, unwinding the scarf of his *cafia* and taking a scroll therefrom.

"And unto thee," said Ramon in response.

"Allah send thee good tidings," said the Arab as he proffered the parchment. Ramon did not unfold it, but sought to read the nomad's face. Seeing naught written thereon of knowledge, he called the Sudanese and bade them set forth food and drink for the messenger.

"Allah increase thee a thousand-fold," said the man as he followed the slaves. The gaze of the Hindu followed him, seeking to read from tarboosh or burnoose the station of the man.

The camel might have come from the royal caravansaries, and he relished not that the eyes of one who served the Sultan be upon him while he read.

For days the little caravan had journeyed on into the desert, sometimes halting near nomad camps, sometimes in the vast plains of sand. Once, when they were about eight days from Tunis, an Arab boy, young enough to be allowed to go unnoticed among the Moslem women who journey in the desert, furnished the de-

scription of a beautiful girl and told of her traveling in the care of a youth called Selim.

On hearing this, Attar was impatient to go the way this Selim and the woman had gone; but after riding half a day, when they had come upon the little party, he was disappointed to find that his quest was fruitless, the youth was not Selim, and the girl did not recognize him.

Again they heard of a woman who had but lately been in the seraglio. She was with a small caravan, but when they had turned aside and come upon the camp, they saw by the glow of the fire that the woman was not Aletra; and as there was no other they turned back.

Their camels were swift, but they made slight progress in their journey. As each clue proved a mirage, the Moslem's words were fewer, his smile became rarer, and his face held a deep sadness that forbade the voice of solace.

Ramon had ridden beside him more often than before; for the Hindu had the gift of silence, and his presence soothed the heart. But they had been wandering more than a score of days, and must needs go beyond the sultanate or return, an the Moslem should be safe.

Now that no eye was upon him, the Wizard broke the seal and unfolded the parchment. He read:

Peace be unto thee, O Ramon the Unknowable. The scroll setting forth the way thy quest fareth hath come to me. Yet word from me canst thou not expect. Thy serpents would be kinder than I were I so near as they. I write now for the reason that what Allah hath denied thee in the token of a loving heart, he hath given thee doubly in wit.

I had not dared to set this before the eyes of him who is with thee, but I know that thou wilt be beside him, that

thou wilt endure to the end, thinking thy unutterable thoughts, but silent. And it is because of this silence that I write thee, and thou wilt see by these words that I have trusted thee, even with the things that concern mine own life. Therefore seek solitude when thou readest and tell none of the import of my words.

How the knowledge here set forth hath come to me I need not tell thee, but the truth of Allah is in my words, therefore give heed.

Have a care for the life of him who is with thee, for danger threateneth also in the dunes. The Pardoner, the Highest, hath been in hot wrath, and he who looketh to his pleasure hath fared from Tunis with camels and trappings of a merchant. But the beasts are from the royal caravansaries and one beareth a bassourah with silken lining—an empty bassourah—and lesser slaves have questioned concerning the way of the Moslem with the golden beard.

Thy footsteps are followed and the shadow of thy camels are spied upon. Thou canst not hold the woman from the royal lips, but thou hast wit to preserve the Moslem who would destroy himself for a dream.

I will continue to bide in the shelter of my kinsman's harem, whither I have gone from the Street of the Dancers, an thou wouldst write. Yet would I counsel thee to send no word lest it betray thy quest, which Allah protect.

Salaama.

SHE WHO DANCED BEFORE THEE THY LAST NIGHT IN TUNIS

When Ramon had read this lengthy epistle, he said naught to Attar about it, but hid the letter in his burnoose.

"For," he thought, "destruction awaiteth him if he measure his strength with the power of the Sultan, and in the silence of the desert is safety, and even peace cometh there on the wings of time."

CHAPTER XXII

THE LOVE OF THE SERPENT CHARMER

It was night in the Sahara, before the rising of a late moon. Ramon and Attar sat in the shelter of a great dune, for it was cold, and the fire but smoldered.

Neither spoke; but, though the night was young, they drew their fur garments close and held their burnooses tightly about their faces. For the breath of the desert night is like the coldness of a woman who realizes that she has smiled too warmly in an earlier hour; following closely upon the quivering heat of the shadowless golden day, the leaden cold of the sand wilderness is doubly felt.

Two Sudanese were on their way to a merrymaking before the fires of a great caravan that rested not far away.

As they passed, their voices came faintly on the clear air. Ratani, the older one, was singing. The melancholy of his minor tones was echoed at intervals by the notes of a flute—reedlike, mellow, haunting, limpid—as if the sighs of love and sorrow and desire had trembled over the strings of a human heart and melted into one another.

The melody was for the singer's best-loved wife, who, through the compassion of Allah, the Most Great, awaited him at the gates of paradise.

And, though he embellished and changed the song with each repetition, it held ever that strange commingling of asceticism, spiritual adoration, and sensuous entreaty that distinguishes the love-songs of the East from all others. It may not have reached the ever-listening ear of the houri at the gates of the blest abode, but the woman who heard it—the woman before the fires of the scattered nomad tents in the Sahara night—sighed.

The sound of the flute swelled or diminished as the player rose upon a dune or sank in the deep hollows, till it grew faint and was lost in the distance, echoing only at intervals, like a silver thread of sound, in the fancies of those who had listened.

Ramon rose and threw some fresh fagots upon the smoldering fire, first gathering the half-burned pieces into a pyramid; then he returned to his place beside the Moslem. The fire was to one side, so that the radiance from it accentuated the shadowy billows of sand that rose and fell beneath the vapor-like star-shine.

Attar's eyes were fixed upon the faint silver distances of the desert, with the eternal question that unpeopled vasts provoke. He had taken no heed when the Hindu rose or returned; for the desert is filled with thoughts, as the ocean with water.

Since journeying into the desert, they had followed the slenderest threads of trails that promised any clue to Aletra or Selim's movements. But, as one by one these clues ended in nothing but disappointment, they discussed the subject less and less, and fell to forming theories silently as they rode upon their camels—theories that, like the changing dunes, swirled into new shapes and perspectives with every breath of desert wind.

Their only and last hope now was that Aletra had reached the Village of the Weavers with Selim, leaving no trace of her journey for others to follow.

Attar was changed much. His great stature was unbent. He was still colossal in form, but no longer gave the suggestion of limitless strength, as in the past. He seemed like a white mystic. The broad brow, the shadowed splendor of the dark-blue eyes, the solemnity of his distant gaze—all told of a newly awakened consciousness that was tearing the flesh and stamping the brow with the incomparable knowledge and dignity of suffering.

Twice, as they sat in the starlight, Ramon thought to touch him or to speak. But, looking into his face, he saw that he was far away on the ceaseless quest; and, fearing to cross the path of his thoughts, he did not break the silence till he saw by a slight movement of the other that he had followed the trail of fancy or hope to the end and was come back. Then, with touch soft as a woman's, he laid his hand upon Attar's and asked:

"Is thy heart hopeful? Thou hast thought long."

"Nay," was the answer. "I see neither light nor the promise of light."

"Yet, could they have journeyed by another way to the mountains; and, also, could there be another Selim of frail stature with whom the woman traveled?" mused Ramon. The other shook his head sadly.

"A year back," he said—"a year back I sat amid a blooming harem—beloved—loving. To-night I lie in the desert, desolate."

"Yet thou livest, and canst demand much of life."

"Thou hast spoken well, O my friend. But the flower of my life is an aloe, bitter to the taste."

"At times the future, that swathes itself in amber and flame, is a shriveled monster in the unwinding, and again, garbed in gray, the day may unfold to brightness, as a dark-hued haik, when lifted, discloseth the face of a beautiful woman."

Attar, who had borne his sorrow with dignity, nor spoken of his grief, groaned as he listened.

"Thou knowest not," he said after a pause. "Thou knowest not the torment of thy words. For all the years that my life shall number, be they few or many, are wound about the heart of my beautiful woman."

"Even so, O my friend, with the passing of the years cometh peace."

"Thou, O Ramon, art not a man but a saint! A patient, silent Marabout; to thee can I open my heart. To thee and to none other. Ne'er was there woman like Aletra! She—she——" Then in sudden fury he interrupted himself. "An any man hath taken her from me—be he Bedouin or Sultan—he shall pay the red price!"

From the passion of the outburst it was plain to Ramon that this thought was not new to the other—that it had ridden with him on the journey and haunted his fancies at night. And for this it was that he had fared with him out of the sight of the Sultan's palace. For he thought that Aletra still lived behind the gates of some one of the great harems. Now he made answer:

"Such words but poison thy body and wear thy soul. Strength and fulfilment come only with the tranquillity of nature. Destruction cometh with the wrath of a moment, and foameth in the mouth of the tempest. So much power canst thou use each day, and unto it must thou not seek to add, lest thou go outside the great law of the worlds.

"Consume not thy soul to ashes in the melting-pot of hate," he concluded softly, again laying his hand upon the Moslem's shoulder.

"Thy words, O Ramon, are words of wisdom; but scant room in my heart is there for wisdom when I think of Aletra. An thou hadst seen her or heard her voice—thou wouldst know! If I could but tell thee! She was fairer than a flower—like a cypress——"

With faltering voice he buried his face in the folds of his white burnoose and sobbed as if for the dead:

"Oh, my beautiful woman, my beautiful woman!"

"Perchance," said the Hindu softly, "she hath come nigh unto being as fair as my beautiful woman."

"Thine?" exclaimed Attar in amaze, startled out of his bitterness.

"Yea, mine," returned Ramon with the sudden asperity that often found its way into his tone, like lightning on the gray of a cloud.

"I had not known," apologized Attar. "A man groweth selfish in his sorrow. Where dwelleth she?"

"In the house of my rival—Ravanna, one of the princes of India."

"Ever knew I thou wert not like unto the nomads, though thou livest their life," returned the Moslem.

He wanted to ask further, but with Oriental courtesy forbore, yet an unseen cord had drawn them closer; both had suffered. That was why he had bared his heart without shame.

There was silence for a time between them. Then the Hindu spoke:

"Shall I tell thee how it befell that I made friends with the serpents of the desert—how I hid mine eyes from the sight of love for many years—how I consumed my soul in the longing for a sight of the one

face—the one forbidden face? Shall I tell unto thee the story of Naketa?"

"An thou deemest me worthy," returned the Moslem softly.

Silence was about them—the silence of the desert which can be likened unto none other. They were surrounded by the space, the vastness, the mystery of what is, and has been, and ever will be.

In the great stillness stretching beneath the stars the earth attuned to the voice of Sahara will hear a pulsing—a close and clear and rhythmic pulsing from the very heart of God. Ramon heard it; Attar felt it; and by it were measured all things human and divine. Ramon took from the folds of his burnoose a small object, and after gazing upon it in the dim light, handed it to Attar.

"Naketa," he said, as if presenting a sensate being, yet scarcely breathing the name. His voice held a new note—tender and caressing. Then, as the other turned toward the fire the better to see, he gently took the small piece of carved ivory back. Light and darkness were as one to him, and he looked for a long moment upon it.

Silence fell between them for a time, then Ramon spoke very slowly, as if he were alone:

"Vain is the man who thinketh his own sorrow or delight differeth from another's, or that another could ever look upon the face of his beautiful woman with the same eyes that he beholdeth her with. Thy beautiful woman filleth thy heart, even so was my heart filled by Naketa. Thy flesh and thy soul crave thy beautiful woman; happiness canst thou not see without her, nor considerest thou a paradise where she is not.

"Even so my flesh and my soul craved mine, nor saw I happiness in this or any other life without her. An-

other desired thy flower of perfection and took her to himself, giving thee substance which thou didst cast aside. Another craved my flower of perfection, took her unto himself, and sent me gold, which I also cast aside. Thy wrath craveth that this man shall pay the red price—even so thirsted I for the blood of the man who betrayed me.

"Thus far, O Attar abu Hamed al Hassen, have we journeyed the paths of bliss and the black wilderness of hate together. How this befell hath little weight, and that which came to me I doubt will ever come to thee. Yet will I tell thee, that thou mayest know the measure of power a man may mete unto himself."

Again he paused, then began in short, abrupt sentences. His voice was hard and he spoke as if with an effort:

"Once in the years that followed, I, a charmer of serpents, came upon this man, mighty in his riches and strength. My beautiful woman loved him. Then, when she believed me dead—they—had—a child. For her sake I had never returned to India or claimed mine inheritance or title, lest she know the bitterness of the cup I drank alone. When I thought of this, my fingers writhed to tear at his heart. Then fate put his life in my power. I had but to wait the swift stroke of a serpent's fang and he would be destroyed. I saved him —for her sake.

"Greater bitterness than this can no man know. I wish to thee that thou shalt never be called upon to bear the knowledge that thy pearl is content without thee, or that thou shalt ever know the bitterness of sparing the life of him who wronged thee to secure the happiness of the woman thou lovest.

"This have I done, and it hath seared my soul—yet of such moments is power begotten. Such knowledge learned I in the grotto of the White Mystics, whither I went in the first days of my sorrow when the spirit of me was sick unto death. Knowledge cometh slowly and after much fasting, and every man must buy it for himself with countless hours of patience and suppression of the puny human will.

"Thus it befell that the enemy within me, that had fed upon my life's blood through many years, perished in that swift moment when the serpent sought to strike Ravanna; for in that moment my angel-deva tore him from my heart and freed me from his consuming grasp; for in that moment, when I had conquered my desire for Naketa, I first began to know the meaning of the mystery of love.

"The next day, as Ravanna rode away, I saw him—large-limbed, serene, confident. But even as I looked upon my rags, I knew that for the shadow of a moment I had been as the great Om (God)—the moment that I had conquered the enemy within me, the thirst for blood—the moment when I had given him his life.

"Did his lips smile? Did he move in lusty health? It was my gift. Did Naketa's lips move in prayer for the return of her love? My hand had answered her prayer. I had passed from the torment of effect, to the great order of cause."

"Thou hast never seen thy Naketa again?" asked Attar.

"Never have I feasted mine eyes upon her again."

"And hast thou ne'er sought the solace of a wife?" asked the Moslem.

"Yea," admitted the Hindu. "Soon after the de-

parture of Ravanna I fell ill of a desert fever, and the daughter of a weaver ministered unto me. When I waxed strong again, her father gave her to me to wife.

"I told her of Naketa. She made no answer, but served me in humility and kindness.

"For three years she had been a good wife to me, when one day a stranger set his tent hard by my own. It was evening, about a moon later, that she, Sohora, came and, bending low before me, asked that I divorce her and bestow her upon the stranger.

" 'Have I not treated thee well, or hath thy burden been too heavy?' I questioned, and she made answer, sorrowfully:

" 'Nay, thou art ever a kind master.'

" 'This man,' I told her, 'will cause thee to bear heavy burdens, and hath a harsh voice. Wherein is his advantage over me?'

"And after a time she answered slowly, veiling her eyes that I should not see the hurt.

" 'He hath not the memory of a Naketa.' "

Here Ramon paused, as if the confidence were at an end.

"And what didst thou?" asked Attar.

He smiled sadly.

"She had spoken that which was unanswerable, and when the time of divorce was fulfilled I gathered what substance I had and gave it to her as a dower and sent her forth with her new husband, who had no memory of a Naketa.

"Women," he mused after a pause, "good women, crave love, and are not content with its counterfeit."

"What meanest thou by counterfeit?" asked the Moslem.

"The flesh hath many loves, the heart but one," answered the Hindu.

"Thou speakest the truth," sighed the Moslem.

"Women are like flowers," said Ramon slowly. "Some bloom content with richest color beside marsh wastes, where the air is heavy and the water hath a poisonous flow, and he who would may stoop and pluck them. And some there be that blow in snowy whiteness only on the heights, and he who craveth to touch them must cast all worldly weights aside and climb unhampered by detaining arms."

"And hath there been no other?" asked the Moslem, ignoring the simile.

"None but the flowers along the roadside."

As he spoke, the shadow of the Sudanese who had returned fell between the two men and the flickering fire. Ramon rose, and drawing his mantle about him, sought his tent.

CHAPTER XXIII

ALETRA READS THE SAPPHIRE'S TALE

It was midday in the Sahara. The Red Rocks of Jazeb rose like tongues of fire from the lips of the dunes.

Aletra and the Copt, Zobel Ben Zewar, had traveled many leagues into the desert—she with her beauty thrice veiled, he sightless but ever searching the yellow distances with the torch of memory and calling upon her to people the shining wastes with the fancies of his lost youth.

Their tents lay in the shadow of the rocks, and at a little distance was a young camel eating durah. Beyond were other tents, for it happened often that they traveled with friendly Bedawi faring upon the same road.

Zobel, relieved from the rocking of the camel, appeared to doze, but his sightless eyes strove ever to pierce the yellow distances about him. Having been blind but a few years, he knew the beauty, the vastness, the clearness, the magic of the desert. The brilliance of the sun lifted something of the darkness that hung before his eyes, while the smell of the tents and the camels and the rugs brought memories that were nigh as clear as vision.

Aletra drew her veil close, for though she disfigured not her face when she fared with the Copt alone, ever

she lay the parchment upon it when they chanced to journey with others; and when it was thus covered with sickly whiteness she veiled it doubly. For this reason the women of the caravans liked her not, thinking her prideful or that her veil hid mystery.

Now she stood by the mouth of the tent looking over the rolling dunes as if she might read the future. Though many had overtaken them, no word had drifted to her ear concerning any of her house, yet she was not cast down or discouraged, for safety also hid in the silence.

And even when separated from those that fared along the way, she had no fear. Sahara, the silent spirit, wrapped in the magic of the sun, made her heart strong. Sahara, mother of the moon-children who whisper secrets to those that sleep on the sand, comforted her.

The seraglio, the silent-footed slaves, the raiment of magnificence, and the burning eyes of the Sultan seemed far—remote as a dream in some distant world, unreal as if they had happened to women other than herself. Yet her parting with Attar seemed of a nearer day—very close. At times she could seem to smell the tambac of his burnoose and the amber that scented its folds.

The nights were never lonely, for the dreams her thoughts wove of him were delicately tender, though ravishingly sweet and sufficing. The unreason of knowledge was upon her. She felt the mystery that is no longer mystery to those that harken to the voice of the desert.

And with every step into the further, inner heart of the dunes she felt as if she were drawing near to the master. Oft her lips broke into song that was as of a

bird in mating-time. Such a note trembled upon her lips at the moment, as the Copt strove to people the golden field with visions of the past.

"Ah, youth!" he cried. "Hagar, thou art young. What seest thou? What color have the stones? What voice hath the sand?"

"The rocks, O my father, are red and deep like the stain of henna, like the brightness of coral also in places, and like the color of a costly rug. Gold, too, are the rocks where the sun shineth upon them and saffron and amber, and the dunes are white and yellow and gray in the distance, and closer they answer the sun in a brightness that dazzleth the eye."

"Lie the mountains in the distance a girdle of gray or of blue or of purple? One of these it is, for men's eyes may change, but Sahara is changeless. The sires of men that have slumbered for thousands of years have seen it as thou seest it, and as many years will fall upon it in the future, still will it wear its aged youth."

When he ceased speaking, Aletra answered:

"The mountains are clad as in the raiment of kings, O my father, in purple, with turbans of snow that touch the sky."

The Copt smiled his wrinkled smile that made his face seem goodly.

"It is not that which is in the desert, but that which the eye beholdeth, that maketh the picture and keepeth it in the mind till the days have grown old. But the voice of the wilderness—what sayest the voice, my daughter?"

For a time she answered not, her eyes bent upon the far distances.

"The voice, O my father, speaketh strange words, some to thee and some to me. But to both it sayeth that it hath many golden years still in its bosom."

"It is well," he answered, satisfied, and again silence fell between them.

The camels fell upon durah. The Bedawi of the near tents sat about their noonday fires; the dogs slept in the sun; unbroken silence lay over the distance.

After a time Zobel bent his ear upon the sand and listened. Twice he did this, then spoke softly to Aletra, whom he called Hagar:

"Hearest thou aught?"

"Naught," she answered, and gazed afar.

"Seest thou aught?"

"Nay."

Again he listened.

"Camels. One—two—three—four—many—I can count them not—come toward us."

Still the dogs lay silent and the desert men rested without perceiving.

"Many camels come, also a horse," said the Copt.

What had been taken from him in sight had been given him doubly in hearing. To Aletra the silence was unbroken; but she knew his power, whether of hearing or foretelling, and hastened into the tent and put the parchment freshly upon her face; for he had pointed the way the caravan was approaching, and ever she feared caravans traveling swiftly and overtaking them.

When she came forth again, the dogs were drinking the air and a young camel groaned as if in greeting or unrest. The Bedawi bent their eyes upon the distance, and soon a cloud—a small, white cloud—rose like smoke

beyond the farther dunes. As if created with a single heart and will, the desert men sprang to their feet, the dogs lifted their voices, the camels stamped or roared with the uneasiness of the hour, and the women drew their veils against the eye of the stranger.

Swiftly the cloud widened; higher it rose as the strange caravan approached, till within the cloud could be seen camels—many—and a horse. The camels were white and swift and young and carried merchandise. And when they approached, it was seen that one carried a *bassourah.* They were the camels of a merchant of Tunis—so said a slave who ran before; for the caravan was held at a little distance and word sent to the Bedawi that their women might seek shelter from the eyes of strangers. When this was accomplished, the merchant and those that were with him came forward.

"Peace be unto you," they cried, salaaming, and again "Peace be unto you," and again "Peace be unto you."

"And unto you," the Bedawi made answer.

"And unto you," said Zobel.

The stranger and those that were with him alighted, and they were made welcome. Their camels were fed and their water-skins filled with water from the spring beyond the rocks, and their tents were spread and their curtains were hung—for they had come a long distance and would tarry the night.

Aletra, hidden within the tent, sought to behold the strangers.

Through a rent in the cloth she saw those that were with him, but the merchant held his burnoose so that she saw not his face.

There were many slaves with the stranger's caravan,

and they made fires and prepared food that had a rich odor; and the Bedawi women, thinking another woman had come in the *bassourah,* sent tea flavored with the leaves of mint and such sweets as they had with them; but the *bassourah* was empty. No woman was with the caravan.

Aletra came from the tent and mingled with the Bedawi, but she could not gain sight of the merchant. Those that had seen him said he was ill-favored and as one used to command. Hearing this, she turned away sadly, for ever in her dreams Attar had ridden to her on a camel; and ever, though she feared the swift caravan coming from the south, also she hoped and visioned delight in the sand-smoke of every one that overtook them. Now, seeing that there was neither anything to hope for or to fear, she sat before the tent and listened to the gossip that ever travels with the swift.

"Idillah hath left the Street of the Dancers."

"The leader of the faithful hath a new favorite sheik upon whom he lavisheth honor."

"The Franks were driven from the Sultan's presence by a man of the people."

And through it all she listened and hungered for a word from the house of the master, yet feared she to question, for she ever remembered the wise words of Zobel:

"Silence is a shield, my daughter—a shield that preserveth as a fine armor."

The Bedawi and even the Copt were bidden to the feast, and when all had partaken, a merrymaking was begun, tom-toms were beaten, and a Rauwha told stories before his tent. A young camel-driver, with a voice like

a flute, sang of the beauty of a woman whose loveliness fired the hearts of those who listened.

There was also a sand-diviner, who told the secrets of Kismet, that which has been hidden from the beginning. And when one and another of the desert women heard the words of fate concerning the things that were to befall each one, there was weeping and laughter and cries of *"Aï, aï, aï!"*

To him, as he stirred the grains of prophecy, Aletra listened despite her anxious fear lest the lifting of the corner of her veil should guide one who sought her. And as she listened there came and stood at her side the merchant, whom she heeded not at first. Yet as the diviner spoke, with the monotone of his calling, solemn as a Marabout, Aletra's soul within her became aware that sharp, eager eyes were upon her, that they seemed belike to pierce the covering of her *haïk*.

She arose and looked at the merchant. Of his face she could see naught, for he was closely muffled in his white burnoose. Yet a nameless terror gripped at her heart—for, by Allah, he was of the stature and the girth and the haughty, truculent bearing of one who——

"Jeppa!"

It was the voice of Babek, the chief eunuch of the seraglio, that spoke.

Aletra shrieked and would have fled into the tent, but Babek barred her way with his great bulk.

Taking a ring bearing the royal seal from his burnoose, he held it aloft and called upon the men of the caravan to harken, and spoke as one having authority:

"I have deceived ye, O my brethren," he said. "I

am not a merchant, but one of the royal household—Babek, chief eunuch of the great harem. And I proclaim this woman, the woman of mystery who standeth before you, to be the Nourmahal of the Sultan, Jeppa, of Tunis."

And he came close to Aletra and would have plucked her veil away but that she drew back and raised her hand.

"Need is there none to unveil the desire of the Commander of the Faithful before the eyes of lesser men," she said. I deny not that I am Jeppa of Tunis, yet would I have speech with thee concerning the things which have befallen me, where none may hear."

And Babek fell back, saying:

"Thou hast rare wisdom. Let it be even as thou sayest."

And she took him within the tent, and when she had closed the mouth thereof she questioned:

"Hath word come from the master? Hath he given me unto the Sultan?"

But she held her veil close, though her white arm was bared to the shoulder. Babek, seeing her weakness, was a long moment in answering, and he framed his words craftily that her woman's pride should serve him in the long journey back to the seraglio.

"Hath he given me unto the Sultan?" she asked again.

"Yea," said the eunuch. "He that was thy master hath returned from the new country and is one of the royal household. In the hour of his return came he before the Sultan that he might be given that which was promised an thou wert dead—for it was rumored that thou didst perish. But he believed not that thou wert

dead, and the Sultan promised him greater things an he should find thee.

"He hath his part in the seraglio wherein to dwell, and hath also been given the tribute of a desert city wherein he may rule. From his own harem hath the Sultan given him wives—Zittara, the Kabylian, and Azalia, the Greek—both of these hast thou seen—both thou knowest are fair."

When he had said this, Aletra cried:

"Tell me no more! Tell me no more!" and she sank to the sand and put her forehead upon it, and the meaning of life grew suddenly dark before her. But Babek, having no tenderness, spoke again:

"He delighteth most in Azalia. But all of these things are the price of *thee* and thou art not forthcoming. And, having found that thou hadst fled with the Copt, he seeketh thee. Therefore hath he bidden me persuade thee, an I came upon thee first, and give thee his excuses that he would not hide thee in a poor harem when thou art craved of the Great. And he beseecheth thee to submit thyself to the Sultan."

"He hath sent such word?" said Aletra in anger.

"Yea. And furthermore he hath said that thou shouldst consider his fortune as well as thine."

And again she said:

"He hath said this?"

But she could scarce speak the words, so overcome was she with amazement and wrath.

"Yea," he answered again, and he was well pleased with the workings of his crafty words. "The sheik, Al Hassen, hath also set forth upon another road that he may tell thee with his own lips lest thou shouldst doubt me. At Biskra shalt thou see him if it be not sooner."

And when she heard this, she was silent, and walked a little way from the slave and covered her veil even with her hands lest he peer through it. When she spoke again her voice was changed. It was as if rocks, grating against one another, fell from a great distance.

"But how wilt thou make peace with the Sultan for me?" she asked.

"He shall think that thou hast been taken for ransom, and that I rescued thee."

"It is well," she said. "And now will I charge thee with words to the Sheik al Hassen, for I crave not to see his face again. Tell him I sigh for the fragrance of the Sultan's harem—that the Sultan hath cast a spell over me with the glory of his glance—that his touch sendeth my blood into delight, and that I shall die content an I have the honor of bearing a son to him. Tell him I picked Azalia for him, as she is beautiful and hath wit enough.

"Tell him——" she choked upon the words. "Nay, Babek, believe my words or believe them not, as thou wilt; but tell him—tell him—tell him." And her body trembled with the agony and rage of the moment.

"And now thou mayest leave me," she said, and the slave turned to go, but e'er he left her he said:

"I will make ready thy tent of silk that I have brought, and put fresh rugs in the bassourah which waiteth thee, and its perfumed curtains shall be of any tint thou shalt consider, for, O Jeppa, thou art not as other women. Generations have passed since such beauty, and wit, and courage hath cast a shadow in the great harem. Thou hast made a thrice blessed choice for thyself and for Islam. May the blessing of Allah be upon thee——"

But she motioned him to go. And when she was alone, she smote her breast and fell upon the sand and wound her arms aloft as in a frenzy, and loosened the mantle from about her white throat as if it bound her.

"Allah," she said. "Allah, Allah," and "Azalia the Greek! Azalia the Greek," she repeated, "preferred of me! And for this have I risked a sultan's displeasure—for this have I walked with the unclean and worn coarse raiment and toiled beneath heavy loads as might a nomad," and again she smothered a cry of desolation.

"Allah preserve me from madness," she moaned as she rocked herself in her woe. "But he shall pay to the uttermost. Yea; for Azalia shall tell him how mine eyes thirst for a sight of the Sultan; how mine ears feast upon the Sultan's words; how I pray Allah for a son. I shall laugh with her at the poor wit of the Sheik al Hassen, and tell of the gray years that were mine beneath his roof. Yea, he shall pay; he shall pay!" she cried as she tore the coarse garments from her body and prepared to remove the parchment.

"Come forth, my beauty," she called as if to a woman other than herself. But when she was half unclad, she paused, and the words of Babek came to her afresh.

"If he brought word that I had become a leper I would be neither of the dead nor of the harem, and he would lose his greatness—and also Azalia, the Greek."

And she thought long.

"I fear," she murmured, "that the things I would do I cannot do, and that I shall look for a sight of the master's face. Awha! Awha!"

Then the words of the slave came to her again and anger consumed her anew, and she sprang from the

sand to clothe herself in the garments Babek had sent. The sapphire fell from her bosom and lay upon the sand. But even as she stooped to lift it, the words of the Sultan came to her:

"This hath been the magic jewel of a great diviner, and holdeth secrets in its heart."

The light fell upon it through a rent in the cloth above her. The jewel was blue like the water in deep places, and like the water, the eye could not reach its depth.

"Tell unto me," she said, holding the sapphire, "tell unto me the truth. The future lieth hidden in darkness. The truth! The truth! The truth!" she besought.

And as she looked into the heart of the stone, her anger dropped from her like a torn garment, and the strength of her rage forsook her, and she was weak as a young child; for three words burned in the heart of the sapphire, not in script, but in the language of understanding which hath not form nor color, and the words were:

"He hath lied."

Without, the slaves were making ready her tent of silk. She heard Babek give command concerning her food and the trappings of her bassourah, heard the sound of gold passing from hand to hand, breathed the fragrance of the scented stuffs that were to adorn her bed. But still she lay upon the sand looking into the sapphire; and in the magic of the hour it seemed that the master stood beside her.

When night had fallen, she wound her coarse *haik* about her and went forth to find Babek. As she passed the silken tent that had been spread for her, those that

were in her way salaamed low, as if to a princess, while others sprinkled perfume in her path.

When he beheld her, Babek came forward to know her wish, and she commanded him to follow her till they were beyond the hearing of others. And when they had gone a little way, she paused on the farther side of the great rocks, and looking through the swathings of her veil, said three words:

"Thou hast lied."

"I! Lie!" cried the eunuch. A sudden fury shook the great figure of the slave.

"This to me?" he cried, and made a swift step forward. "Knowest thou not, thou scraping of a poor man's harem, that I may have thee beaten till naught remaineth of thy beauty?" he cried in hot rage. "Knowest thou not that thy life lieth in my hands? The darkness of the walled death shall be thine an thou openest thy lips in my presence again. And now will I give thee a sign of the gentleness of Babek's hand!"

As he spoke, he sprang toward her, reaching as if to grasp and destroy her. But what is the might of a giant eunuch, a royal caravan, a host of slaves, nay, even the Sultan himself, compared to a woman's wit?

In that moment she unveiled her face.

His hands fell as if palsied.

"A leper! *Thou!* Great Allah! Thou—a—*leper!*"

"Thou seest," she said coldly. "Now go hence and tell to thy master how poorly hast thou guarded the treasure of his heart."

As she spoke she covered her face, for she craved not that his gaze be upon her over long.

"How—how——" began Babek as he stood trembling in the shelter of a rock whither he had fled for fear.

"Dost doubt? Wouldst look further? Wouldst perchance touch my tortured face? Behold, I am willing!" she cried, approaching him.

"Touch me not! Touch me not!" he yelled in terror. "Wouldst thou destroy me utterly?"

But heeding him not, she bore swiftly upon him and seized his garments.

"Allah send thee a thousand deaths!" he cried as he tore from her grasp. And crying "Unclean! Unclean!" he fled into the gathering night.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE GALLOP OF THE SAND STEEDS

ALETRA slept not when the night had fallen, nor ceased to harken to any that passed beside the tent. But when it was nigh unto midnight, sleep overcame her for an hour.

When she awoke, she could see by the sheen of the sand close outside the tent that the moon had come up, and she rose to keep the tryst of prayer for the master as she had told him she would, ever, when the moon first lay upon the mosque. And when she came without she looked toward the tents of Babek, and lo there were none; and again to the place where the tents of the Bedawi had risen, and behold, they also were gone.

And as far as she could discern in the crystal light of the moon, was naught to be seen of man or camel or tent other than the tent of Zobel beside her own, and the young camel that was tethered beyond the caravan's dead fires.

No wind was abroad; the dunes rolled in magic clearness beneath the silver light, so white, so pure it was, that colors like faint woven silks fresh from the looms of paradise showed close and far. She had no fear of the loneliness. The night smiled upon her, and from her shadowed place beside the rock she smiled back upon

it and lifted her arms toward it and her lips, still tinted with the rose of her dreams, exalted the hour as if tidings of great good were upon her and she had come into security.

In her short sleep she had dreamed that it was spring, that she stood in the little kiosk in the harem garden at Tunis, and that Attar came to her. He wore a white burnoose and seemed to have just come from a desert journey. And as he neared her, the wind blew and a shower of rose-petals covered them both and they laughed in delight. Then, with the magic that fashions dreams, it seemed that a child lay on her breast, and that stooping, he kissed them both. Her waking had been slow, and she still clung to the memory of the hour.

Zobel, having watched long before her tent, at last had fallen asleep on his rugs, and breathed almost without sound as though overcome with great weariness. She wakened him not, but sped lightly over the sand as if dancing in a garden, for in the hour of her deliverance her heart rejoiced.

"Lo," she said aloud in a voice like the crystal of the moon. "Lo, ne'er before have I known why the desert is likened unto the garden of Allah."

And she drank in the beauty of the sand-flowers and the many colored terraces of the desert that lead to the palace of the moon; and she laughed with the white limbed maidens of the moon as they chased the shadows over the dunes, their tresses of mysterious light trailing behind them. The rocks that marked the distances were like kiosks with trellises of faint bloom upon them; wondrous tints of colors born in heaven lay in places over the gardens of the sand.

Above were the fields of blue where the stars and the

sand held fantasy and quick combat, and over all was the silence—the whispering silence of Sahara—that tells the secrets of eternity. Above her a quick shower of stars seemed so close that she must hear them crashing one against another; but there was no sound, it was as if they were a mirage.

She wove her arms lightly in the invisible lacework of moonbeams as she had when she last stood before the master. Her bare feet made no sound upon the sand; the movement of her young limbs was music. So might a houri of the blest abodes appear when waiting the summons of the inner paradise.

She sank upon a dune, and making a pillow of sand, lay looking up at the stars which, faint in the greater light, still held fantasy above her, darting hither and thither in the blue gardens of the sky. And as she listened to the silence, it seemed struggling as if to speak. A something was coming toward her, swift on the wings of the wind. As she strove to listen to the voice of the silence, a veil came over the further dunes—a veil that hid the whiteness of the magic light.

As she looked it grew darker till the desert lay once more, not a garden, but a waste of shrouded sand. To those that have bided in the desert, the voice of the dunes is like unto the voice of Allah, silent, yet reaching to them from far distances of space, and he who hath once heard it despiseth it not.

Aletra strove with impatience to hear the voice to the end, but the spirit had fled. Then, swift upon the silence came the sound of sand-rain tapping upon the tents, and a duller sound as it struck against the rocks.

The young camel resting beyond the dead fires com-

plained. The wind shook the tent wherein Zobel slept and he stirred.

"Hagar, Hagar!" he called, but half aroused. And she went to him.

"There is something that cometh toward us," said Aletra.

"A caravan?" he questioned.

"Nay, a great wind darkeneth the desert."

"The moon shineth not?"

"Yea, like unto silver, and I see not the form of a cloud; but the voice of the desert hath spoken as I lay upon the sand."

"Be not affrighted. It is not the time of the khamsin."

"And must all things come in the fitness of time?" she asked. "I tell thee a sirocco cometh upon us."

But, as thus the hours passed and the wind came not, it seemed as if the Copt were right. The desert lay a gray waste like a slumbering sea beneath a near sky. But when the day was a few hours old, the sand began to wind its weavings swiftly. Small whirlwinds rose from the dunes and vanished in swirling spray. Beyond, Sahara-mist rose, like clouds, saffron and brown, moving swiftly. Above, the sun was like a great lamp of copper in an amber globe. The rushing of the wind filled the silence as a voice to which multitudes listened. The camel strained against that which bound it.

Zobel's face was grave. Billows of sand beat against the near rocks, breaking in mighty surfs. Small pieces of stone struck with the sound of hail upon other stones that lay about—it was as if the writhings of a serpent filled the world, yet as if a terrible wisdom drove all

before it. The rocks, now covered with whitening sand, were like crouching gods of a past that was dead—of a yesterday long since forgotten.

The wind tore over the wastes without hindrance to its wrath, and its tongue was the tongue of vengeance. But it was not the wind of the sea that spoke. There was anxiety, mystery, urge, mighty conflict in it, that spoke with the voice of living man—dread magic, a hurrying something that drives the soul, a tortured closeness upon knowledge that is yet in its blindness, the unknown—an unrest deeper than the sea or the power that uprooteth in the wooded places of the earth.

It was like no other thing, for it was the risen wind of Sahara.

"Doth the sand hide the sky?" asked Zobel.

"Yea, O my father!"

"Doth the wind come from the east or the west?"

"From the west, yet a little from the south."

"Oh, that I had my sight! My sight!"

"What wouldst thou do that I cannot do for thee?" she questioned.

"Mount the camel and ride—ride across the wind. Move—move that the sand become not thy winding sheet!"

"That couldst thou not do, O my father; for the desert riseth a yellow tide and the billows are mighty."

"Yea, do I not hear?" he answered. "But in a storm must the ship ride or go down to destruction. Hearest thou," he cried, "even the beast sayeth this, and would flee the death of the dunes."

For even as they spoke the camel tore at its moorings and sent a tortured cry into the wilderness. It was morn, but the darkness of nightfall was over all.

"I will go forth and bring the beast into the shadow of the rock," said Aletra. "And thou shalt ride forth or bide as is thy will."

Leagues of rushing wind were as endless parchments unrolled in the madness of haste that the eye might behold the writing of Kismet. She was not afraid, but, drawing her garments more closely, stepped into the darkening tumult.

"Stay thou beside the tent!" she cried through the wind. "Fear not for me!"

Ere she reached the place beside the fires the young camel had torn away, but stood with uplifted head, not yet knowing of its freedom. Aletra called the feeding-call and blindly sought to find durah to tempt it; but, as if it heard another—a voice from a great distance—it roared even as the storm and fled into the heart of the tempest.

For the space of a moment the sun shone through the waves dimly; then, as if all the spirits of those who had perished in the sand from the beginning of time had risen, each bringing a host armed with invisible lancers, the desert closed about her. The fleeing camel was blotted from her sight; the tents were gone. And as she listened to the neighing of the sand-steeds that tore over the desert, the gates of the sands closed upon her.

CHAPTER XXV

STRANGE WRITING IN THE SAND

For two days Attar and the Hindu journeyed steadily into the desert and toward the Village of the Weavers, concerning which place the Moslem deceived his heart with hope.

Ramon, as if half repenting his confidence, rode apart and well in advance. His camel, seeming to understand his mood, quickened his stride whenever the other neared him.

There was not so much as a footstep in the sand, and the vastness and the windless silence of the yellow plain had nothing to impart; but was rather a quivering mirror, before which to adorn oneself with the fine things of the soul.

Ramon wondered not at the vastness about him. Having lived in it so many years, something of it had entered his soul and made him what he was—a seer who looked into the great heart of things and scorned nothing—not even the smallest moving thing upon the sand, yet who exalted nothing into greatness.

To him the desert itself was a scroll of fate, unrolling, league by league, to the music of the sun. Sahara, changeless in its eternal change, was not to him a place *through* which he was journeying to a definite end, but

was rather the beginning, the intervening time and the end, within itself.

On the morn of the third day—a yellow morn bending over the battlements of sand—they were driven from the path of their journey by a great wind. So swift was it, and so suddenly blew the rising clouds from the breast of the desert, that, though all speed was made in folding the tents and loading the camels, they were overwhelmed by the darkness and fury of the storm.

The great voices of the two Sudanese kept the camels together as the beasts plunged across the path of the wind with scarce a leading. Yet was this not the heart of the tempest, but only the wings of the storm that brushed them.

Within an hour the khamsin had passed, and but for a fallen date-palm beside a spring and clean-swept, trackless dunes that reached into the distances, there was no echo left of it in the golden day. But it was well after the noonday prayer ere the caravan had come nigh unto the traveled road again.

When they were come to a rock that had a green mouth which bespoke a hidden spring, they spread the tents and relieved the camels of their burdens, and while the beasts groaned and complained in bitterness—even while they ate the scant durah—Attar went a little way apart that he might give thanks for their deliverance and speak further with Allah concerning his quest—for in the heart of the tempest a voice had spoken to him with a tongue of fire, and a hope that was nigh unto certainty was upon him.

He sought a place between two great dunes and, bowing his forehead to the sand, spoke sacred words and besought Allah to prosper his search.

The wind had left the waste trackless, but when he rose and turned his face toward the west, a writing of strange words lay before him—a writing in Arabic:

"Seek and thou shalt find."

He bent above the crumpled scroll and scanned it eagerly. Then, even while he feared that some stray feather of the wind left from the day would sweep it hence, he called loudly to Ramon, and when the Wizard was come they studied the script together.

"The words hold a strange meaning," said Attar. "None but the hand of Allah may preserve aught upon the sand when the wind bloweth as it hath this day. What sayest thou and we follow for a space the way if seemeth to point—toward the west?"

"It is well," said the Hindu.

CHAPTER XXVI

LOVE IS DISCLOSED TO ALETRA

THEY took their way over low dunes and in shallow troughs, and again along a level stretch, swept clean as a garden path. When the half of an hour had passed, and there was no trace of man or caravan, they thought to return; for night falls quickly in the desert, and the sun was nigh unto the setting, and they turned. But, mounting the last dune, Attar's camel stumbled; and after examining the beast's foot, and when he looked down into the deep trough beyond, there, almost before him, in the shelter of the dune, he saw the words again, written feebly upon the sand:

"Seek and thou shalt find."

"It is a sign from the hand of Allah," said the Moslem; "for, seest thou, there is no footprint?"

The Hindu bent his eyes closely upon the scroll.

"He who hath written this is nigh unto death with weakness or palsy," he said. "Let us go farther."

And they went in silence along a small path, and they held their eyes in close search upon the sand. And when they were come beside a palm that grew near a great stone, again the words, "Seek and thou shalt find," were written in the sand. Yet had they not sought they would have passed them by, so broken was the script, so weakly faint.

There was naught else; but they went a few paces farther into the west and beyond the stone, and there they beheld no track of beast nor man, but the mark of a hand beside the small path.

And when they had gone over the rise and down and along a level way they come upon an Egyptian, bent, shriveled with age, his eyes bandaged, his lips cracked with thirst. His body was almost cold from the advancing night. Life still beat in the aged pulse, but he could not speak.

As they bent above him, the sun showed a half circle in the crimson west.

They had gone far in the unmarked dunes, so Attar lifted the small, shriveled figure and bore it to his camel; and when the beast had knelt he mounted it, still holding his burden.

His great arms formed a bed for the Egyptian, and as the breath of the waning day was chill, he opened his burnoose and drew it over the wasted form.

Ramon, whose camel was very swift, went before, that the path should be marked for Attar's beast; for there was still a slight wind, and they could not see to return by the way they had come. Even the small path that had been made by the Egyptian dragging himself along the sand had been swept away.

When the warmth of the Moslem's body had penetrated his flesh, the man stirred feebly. And when the meaning of life returned to the Copt and he could speak he called weakly:

"Hagar, my daughter Hagar, where art thou?"

Then, feeling the motion of the camel, and also that he was held in strong arms, he became affrighted and sought to free himself.

"Well-nigh hast thou perished," said Attar gently, "but for thy thought to write upon the sand."

"Thou hast a strange voice. Where is Hagar?" asked the Copt.

"Naught have we seen of any but thee. Are thy tents far?"

"In the shadow of the Red Rocks of Jazeb. Yet know I not how far they lie; one full day have I wandered and a night," he said brokenly. "The wind came—my daughter, who journeyed with me had—scarce—left the tent—when the camel fled over the dunes. Vainly she tried—to stay him with a call of food, and fared quickly after the beast—then came the khamsin, swift and with the sting of a thousand serpents.

"But even through the wind I heard her voice calling: 'Seek the tent, O my father; seek the tent and fear not for me.' But, though I have sought, I have found it not, and my sightless eyes have led me into the wilderness, and Hagar is alone."

"To be a woman and alone in the desert is not good," said the Moslem. "And when thou hast had thy morsel, we will go in all haste to thy daughter."

"May the blessings of the Lord Isa rest upon thee and thy children and theirs," murmured the other.

But when they had returned to the tents of Ramon and Attar, the Copt was far spent, and the Wizard feared that he could not survive any further journey, and when they had taken him from the camel he began ministering to the man with his own hands. Now, a Copt is an Egyptian Christian, and the servants of Ramon, being Moslems, considered such scarce better than the dogs.

But ever as they ministered to him the man called, "Hagar, Hagar!" as one in the toils of a fever, and he begged them to put forth at once and seek the girl. Attar drew his burnoose about him, and, taking a skin of camel's milk and some water and bread and dates, fared to the Red Rocks of Jazeb, promising the Copt to find his daughter and bring her unto him.

The Red Rocks were a little more than a league distant. Zobel, the Copt, mistaking the length of the hours, had groped blindly in a path never far from his own tent.

"Small wonder," thought Attar; "yet must the woman also have strayed, else with the eyes of youth would she have found her father."

When he had come upon the rocks, a tent lay near them—a tent the wind had torn widely. A drift of sand held it else would it have blown afar. No further trace of life was there. The wind had washed all footsteps from the sand.

Clambering to the top of the rocks, Attar looked far over the dunes. Leagues of waste rolled into the distance, but naught else met his gaze. Then he lifted his voice and sent it in a mighty call over the dunes.

"Hagar, Hagar, Hagar!" Thrice he called, and then listened for answer. At the sound of the third call there was a cry—faint unto fancy it was, but bore the meaning of a woman in extremity, and he descended, and, looking about him with care, saw a piece of cloth lying close beneath the shelter of a rock. A form moved weakly beneath it.

He swept the sand away and found a woman—a woman swathed in *haik* and veils. But when he uncovered her he sprang back in affright.

"A leper!" cried Attar, for a face white unto death, with the withered whiteness of the unclean, lay before him, and he would not touch her. He returned to the camel and took of the water and cleansed his hands. Yet even as he did this he knew that he would go back to the woman and minister to her, for she was perishing and he thought how he would do this without touching her.

At last he took the rug, for he durst not lay his hands upon her without protection, and approached her where she lay and freed her from the tent stuff which covered her and plucked at her *haik*. But ever he kept from touching her, and the sweat of fear was upon his brow.

"Hath the tent bruised thee?" he asked when she moved as if in pain. "Hast thou——"

He said no more, for at the sound of his voice the woman opened her eyes. A moment she looked blindly into his face. Then, with sudden strength, she cried:

"Master, O master!" and held forth her arms.

"Aletra! Aletra!"

Forgetting his fear, he folded her in a swift embrace. In the gladness of the moment she thought not of the parchment veil upon her face.

At the joy of his touch a new strength ran swiftly through her veins, and when he put a cup to her lips she said:

"O my master, I crave naught but the sight of thy face—the face mine eyes have hungered for in the still watches of the night and in the noontime and the evening."

And he took her in his arms again and wrapped her in his burnoose as if he would defend her from the

world. Then, even as she feasted her eyes upon him, swift, like the thrust of a knife in her heart, came the thought that Babek had not lied. And she questioned:

"How comest thou to wander so far from thy new magnificence whereunto the Commander of the Faithful hath appointed thee?"

"I have his leave to journey," said Attar.

"And the city thou shalt rule over?" she cried, yet waited not for his answer; for now that she saw the sorrow upon his face, she thought it the sorrow of the last farewell from her, and the compassion, like unto a holy man's, which shone in his eyes tore her with anger, and even in the hour of their meeting she could not silence the bitterness of her tongue.

"And Azalia, the Greek," she cried—"bideth she still in the seraglio, or journeyeth she with thee?"

"In the seraglio," he answered sadly, "and there will she bide."

But Aletra understood him not, and thought he sorrowed for that he must needs give her to the Sultan; black rage assailed her, and she tore her coarse garments, and the golden reaches of the desert turned dark in her eyes, and the years grew black before her.

Babek had not lied!

"Go thou!" she cried, trying to rise. "The wilderness is kinder to me than thine eyes. The sands more pitiful than thy lips, an thou admittest Babek's words as truth."

"And what hath Babek told thee?" he questioned.

But she would not answer, and calling "Awah! Awah!" beat upon her breast; yet she wept not. He would have gathered her to him again but that she tore away.

"Ne'er, though the years be few or many, am I for thee again."

"Wouldst thou deny me in the hour of our meeting?" he chided.

"Yea, in this hour and forever. Thou shalt return without me."

And, thinking she would separate herself from him because of the leprosy, he sought to soothe her with gentle words, but she would not listen and turned away.

"Alone shall I dwell in the wilderness," she said, "for in the hour hath youth forsaken me."

"Forget not, O my beloved, that thou art my wife. I am thy master, and where I bid thee dwell there wilt thou dwell," he said in gentle chiding.

"Nay!" she cried in a fresh burst of bitterness. "Thou canst not take me to the seraglio. But in the evening the women who dwell in the great harem—the women shall tell Azalia, of Aletra, how she hath fled a Sultan for thee, and Azalia shall tell them how thou didst find her more to thy pleasure. And the desert city thou shalt rule over——"

"Peace, O my life," he said softly, taking her hand, which she strove to draw from him. "Henceforth shall I live in the far places of the world—I and thou; and the city I rule shall be a city without walls wherein dwell but two—thou and I.

"We will bide in the desert; and when the night falls I will tell thee of all I have refused for thee, and that I am well pleased that I did thus. And thou shalt tell me over again the words of the Sultan, and how thou didst fare from his favor and forsake the seraglio to be with me. And, though in hiding, will we be content."

As he spoke, she listened eagerly, thinking that, having beheld her, he could not put her away, and that he would hide in the desert from the Sultan's displeasure. And her heart beat wildly, and she cast her veil swiftly from her, but in that moment she thought of the parchment. And, as if a great fright had suddenly seized her, she covered her face with her hands that he should not look upon her. And she cast herself at his feet.

But when she would speak, he silenced her and gathered her to him, and in that moment the sands were as of dazzling gold and the unseen blossoms of the silence spread a wondrous perfume. The moments that passed were singing years of delight, and each grain of the desert whispered:

"This is love—love beyond which hath never been offered to woman. He believeth thee a leper, yet feareth not to touch thee."

And she could not stop him nor speak for the words that poured from his lips, and his face was like that of some holy man who had become purified in earth's sorrows. And when he suffered her to speak, she bowed her head again at his feet.

"O Allah," she cried, "give unto me a penance to ease mine heart for that I have doubted love like unto this!"

Then, clasping his feet, she cried afresh:

"O master, unworthy am I to unlatch thy shoes!"

She wept, and her tears loosened the parchment, and she cast it away unseen of the master. And her face shone as she were a daughter of the moon, so fair it was. As he continued to comfort her with the words of a love that was greater than passion of the

flesh, greater than ambition or security or life itself, she unbound her hair and spread it as a shining carpet before him, and besought him to rest his feet upon it. But he bent and lifted her from the sand and beheld her.

"Allah!" he cried, leaping back in amazement. "Allah! A miracle!"

Then, still gazing into her face, he pressed his palms to his brow.

"Allah," he cried, rising, "preserve thou me from madness!"

She feared that he was angered that she had deceived him, and she told him how she had covered her features with a living parchment like unto the skin of the lepers that she might preserve her beauty from the craving of the Sultan, and of how Babek had lied and tempted her but the night before.

He was filled with wonder and delight as he listened. But as she continued to speak even as the Sultan had listened to her words in the seraglio, not hearing them for that the sight of her beauty had dulled his ear, so also Attar now heard her words in the heart of the wilderness without understanding them; for the miracle of her kneeling upon the sand, with her shining hair lying about her, made him deaf.

But in his eyes dwelt the fire, the life, the desire of his manhood. His gaze caressed her, clothed her, embraced her, warmed her, fed her. As she looked the desert faded, and she saw naught but his eyes. They drew her, they encompassed her, interpreted the meaning of the creation of life.

Though they had scorched with a lesser flame when she had withdrawn from him in the ruined temple before he had fared away, now there was naught to flee

from. Yet their flaming hunger was a thousandfold increased. But it was as the white flame of a censer, compared with the fire of a nomad's camp. The one consumeth; the other purifieth. Passion, the passion of the ruined temple before the birth of love, would have consumed her womanhood, made of it something less eternal than Allah had ordained; but, purified by the flame of love that braved the danger of a living death, it became the measure of the intention of the Most Great, the holy flame in the divine censer wherein souls are created under the eye of Allah—souls that redeem the world.

Looking, she crept closer, till in the swift strength of his embrace the desert vanished and the skies were veiled and the rocks and the far distances were blotted out. In the moment of her humility and surrender his power was hers, his strength hers, his desire, his will hers.

Caress for caress she gave him; heart-beat for heart-beat. In the moment she understood the voice of the silence and what it would tell her in the moon-radiance of the night that was past. Sahara sang its vast lullaby of wordless, soundless music; the sky covered them with weaving of the souls of roses; the silence lay, a perfumed amber carpet, at their feet.

That night, Attar's quest being finished, the Hindu bade him farewell and fared back into the wilderness whence he had come. The Moslem, standing before Aletra's tent, saw him in the growing dimness for a while as he rode farther in the golden mist of the night on his camel. Then he vanished in the eternal silence of Sahara, and Attar beheld him no more, nor did he hear of him.

CHAPTER XXVII

CONCLUSION

It was the third day after the finding of Aletra. A caravan journeying to Egypt passed, and great was the rejoicing of the Copt, Zobel Ben Zewar; for with it journeyed a young man of his own house. And with blessings upon Aletra, whom he loved as a daughter, and upon Attar, he bade them farewell after many words of good counsel.

Attar, being alone for a space, began to write to the Sultan. This was not easy, for to confess his ingratitude was to make poor return for the favors bestowed upon him by the royal hand. Again, the wives bestowed upon him were his, according to the law and the Prophet, and the honor of such gifts from the imperial harem must needs be treated with respect. He thought long before he drew the parchment to him and began:

To the Commander of the Faithful:

Sultan of those who still harken to the words of the Prophet. Peace be unto thee. May Allah bless thee and all that dwell in the shadow of thy seraglios throughout the land.

This is from the hand of the Moslem whose wife—that was called Jeppa—found favor in thy sight when she came to the royal harem to minister to one of thy household—one of whom I may not speak. Jeppa, the real Jeppa, wife of my young manhood, a woman beyond price, lieth in the great

silence. Her hast thou, O great Sultan, never beheld, for she whom thou didst look upon was Aletra, my beautiful-wife, who had gone to the royal harem in the place of Jeppa, whose child was even then stricken.

This knew I not when I stood before thee in Tunis. Yet strong was I in the faith that once more would I look into the eyes of Aletra, and Allah rewarded my faith, for I found her. Great is the power of Allah.

Why do I write these words, O Chosen One of Heaven? For what I would give to thine ear a secret. As the leech findeth the plague-spot that causeth death, even so may the plague-spot that consumeth Islam be found upon the many rugs and cushions of the harems throughout the East.

There, upon the faces of the women that are mothers, and of those who are to be the mothers of men, will be found the secret of the failure of the hosts of the Prophet when they stand forth in battle with other nations.

I would not, O mighty Sultan, have thee think that a son of Islam looked with favor upon the ways of the infidel; but of one great truth concerning them would I speak: It is for the reason that their women are *unafraid* that the armies of the Christian nations rule the world.

The day fast approacheth when Islam shall have need of men to meet the Roumi—men strong enough to be forbearing, holy enough to be compassionate, great enough to be humble.

To this end should the rulers of the people of the Prophet seek to raise up a mighty nation whose words may echo in the council chambers of distant lands. To this end should the spirit of Islam bend the thought of its young children, and call into the future to those still unbegotten, that in the time of trial Islam shall not be overcome.

But these men of the coming Islam—the Islam whose prayers are murmured by the lips of a fifth of the world—will not be the sons of women who bred them in fear and suckled them on black jealousy; for a man may get his stature from the bones of his father and his growth from his father's way of life; but oft he getteth his heart from the woman who trembled ere she bore him, who nursed him

in sorrow, who carried him sleeping upon her tortured breast.

As the silence of the desert assaileth the ear in the first watches of travel, even so should the dumbness of the woman of Islam assail the ear of the believer and speak with a greater power than the rush of winds or the rolling of thunder.

For, though she serve ever so humbly, there is revolt in her heart. And the child she will bear shall, in a not distant day, stand thus before the powers of the world: revolting in heart and mind, and though he battle with the fierceness of a dervish he is overcome, while the fat places of Islam are divided before his eyes and the holy places made to be without holiness.

O, thou whom Allah hath set over the souls of many, let me beseech thee to proclaim from the housetops this truth: That it is to the women of a nation that that nation must look for a finer race of men, and it is to the Moslem women that the Moslem must look if Islam shall ever again take her place in the council of nations.

And now would I speak of the two wives thou didst give from the sanctuary of thine own harem. Azalia, the only one that hath come before me, wept grievously that she should be stricken from thy holy presence. She was fair to look upon as a rose in noonday in the heart of August, but though she was fair I touched her not.

That night I fared into the wilderness to find her whom thou hast seen, the rose of the world to me. In the desert I made a covenant with Allah an I found her I would be unto her as she was unto me, and having found her, from this day forth until I shall be gathered to my fathers, even as she hath kept her heart pure for me, will my heart concern itself with no other woman.

Therefore, O mighty Sultan, though I am not ungrateful for thy favor, or heedless of the honors thou didst cover me with, my pen is forced to write these words my tongue doth now utter: "Azalia, I divorce thee, I divorce thee, I divorce thee! Zittarra, I divorce thee, I divorce thee, I divorce thee!"

Concerning the gold and jewels thou hast further bestowed upon me, they still lie in the royal seraglio, for knowing that I would return no more, I took them not hence.

I ask not pardon, for that were too much to ask from even such a bountiful heart as thine. But, an ever the life of Attar al Hassen will serve thee in any task of danger or death, it is thine.

Thus unto thee, who are not only Sultan, but man as well, with tears, the tears of an exile, I whisper farewell, and to the graves of my fathers, to all those I loved in my youth, a tender, long farewell do I write, for well I know I must enter thy sultanate no more.

ATTAR ABU HAMED AL HASSEN.

Aletra returned as he wrote the last farewell. Seeing the many sheets of paper and the gravity of his face, she drew back, and would have gone out again, lest she disturb him, had he not bidden her stay. The three days since they met had been days of glowing happiness and black misery to her. The master was still her world, and her hope of the world to come, but the calm security of the women of the West was not hers.

Attar had been led by the miracle of words that had endured in the sands. The words of the Lord Isa and the prophecy of the Egyptian still besought his ear, yet was he none the less a Moslem in admitting the power of a prophet besides Mohammed. This, she knew, did not weaken his belief in the Mohammedan religion. And in the fullness of time, she reasoned, he would lead the life of his fathers and complete his harem of seven wives, after the manner of his intention before he left Tunis.

When she thought of this, the idea that death might come to her first filled her with a fierce joy. Then she would press these thoughts into the curtained future, and turn from them to the present. It was her hour—and the woman of the East has been taught the value of her hour, and also its briefness, its pitiful briefness!

She was so completely his that the knowledge that she

had withheld something of what transpired in the royal harem bore heavily upon her, and she laid not only every word and action of that time before him, but every thought as well. And when he had heard, seeing the transparent purity of her womanhood, he believed her, and honored her for the truth of her lips.

Now, although he bade her stay, she did not allow her eyes to rest upon the pages. But when he had gathered them together and read them carefully over, he turned and looked toward her as she sat upon a rug a little way apart. "Why art thou so white, O my Flower of the Dawn?" he asked.

"I know not," she answered.

"Hast thou sorrowed much?" he said tenderly.

"Yea."

"Yet now the pomegranate of happiness bursteth into bloom."

For answer she looked long into his eyes. Words were ever few upon her lips, but her eyes had that satisfying quality that made words seem weak.

"Now thy lips should be as the heart of a rose. There is no longer any cause for sorrow."

"Knowest thou not, O master," she said slowly, "that there are many kinds of pain in the life of a woman? There is the pain of sorrow and the pain of happiness. It is as if a woman had brought forth a son after much travail and labor; and as if she feareth to look upon that son lest there be blemish upon him; and even when she hath looked and found him sound, she still claspeth a new fear to her heart concerning other things that she may only know with the passing of time."

"Travaileth thy heart thus?" he asked.

"Even so travaileth my heart, O master," she answered, and for a moment the love in her eyes was eclipsed by a desolation that mirrored all the fear which had torn the hearts of all the women whose blood pulsed in her veins. But even e'er he saw it, the shadow was gone, and bringing her cushion beside him, she sank upon it and rested her face against his hand.

"My well-beloved," he whispered, bending and encircling her with his arms. "Concern not thy heart with our new-born happiness. It hath no blemish, and time will unfold no blemish. An I coined thy worth into words, never would I finish telling thee of the glory of thy smile, the light of thine eyes, the beauty of thy form, the softness of the bloom upon thy cheeks."

As he spoke, he took her hand and nestled it against his heart.

"Take my heart," he said, "thou woman of my earthly paradise. Take it in thy pink palms. The red blood floweth through it. Feel the pulsing of it against thy little fingers, and as thou feelest each throb know that it is thine—thine—thine."

Every word he spoke thrilled her with exquisite waves of emotion, almost an anguish in their delight. Both her soul and young body tasted their sweetness and radiated an intoxicating magnetism in answer. Her head fell back upon his arm; she looked into his face that was so close; the oblivion of the present was slowly closing upon her when, once more, the specter of the future came between, and for an instant desolation entered her eyes.

"What dost thou fear?' he asked. "When thou lookest thus thou art thrusting thorns into the naked heart

of thy Attar—the heart that lies helpless in thy soft hands. Bruise it not with any look of sorrow; rejoice, for it is but the spring-time of our marriage."

"I rejoice," she said, rising and pointing to the papers. "Thou hast written many pages." She had lost something of her fear. "Hast thou written concerning thy holdings and thy house in Tunis?"

Attar took the letter and began to unfold the pages till he came to the first, then gave it all into her hands, saying:

"Read thou, that henceforth and forever thou shalt add peace unto thy love and faith unto thy peace and from them gather the fruit of security."

And she read—and when she had finished, she stood before him clad in a new beauty. It was as if a mortal woman had stood before the spirit of the universe, and as if, with a touch of his wings, he had bestowed immortality upon her. So had the gift of faith fallen upon Aletra.

She spoke no word, but as they stood apart looking into each other's eyes, each reading the soul of the other, each feeling the security of faith against the infinite mysteries of time—though neither as much as touched the tips of the fingers of the other—they were closer than ever the clinging of arms and ardent lips had brought them.

Then, as she still held the letter, she spoke, saying:

"Chain not thy heart with words, O master, lest in the years to come they turn and wound thee."

And he made answer:

"Fear not, O my Flower of the Dawn. The joys of the flesh are as the leaves of the wine of life, giving it something of beauty and grace yet swept hither and

thither. The wind bloweth upon them, they are scattered or fall to the earth and are forgotten.

"But love is the flower of the vine; and in the heart of the flower dwelleth that which *has* been, and *is,* and *ever will be:* the mystery that hath neither beginning nor end nor certain place nor any season—the mystery that is present in all things, and yet dwelleth in the inner heart of Allah, the mystery that is Allah."

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